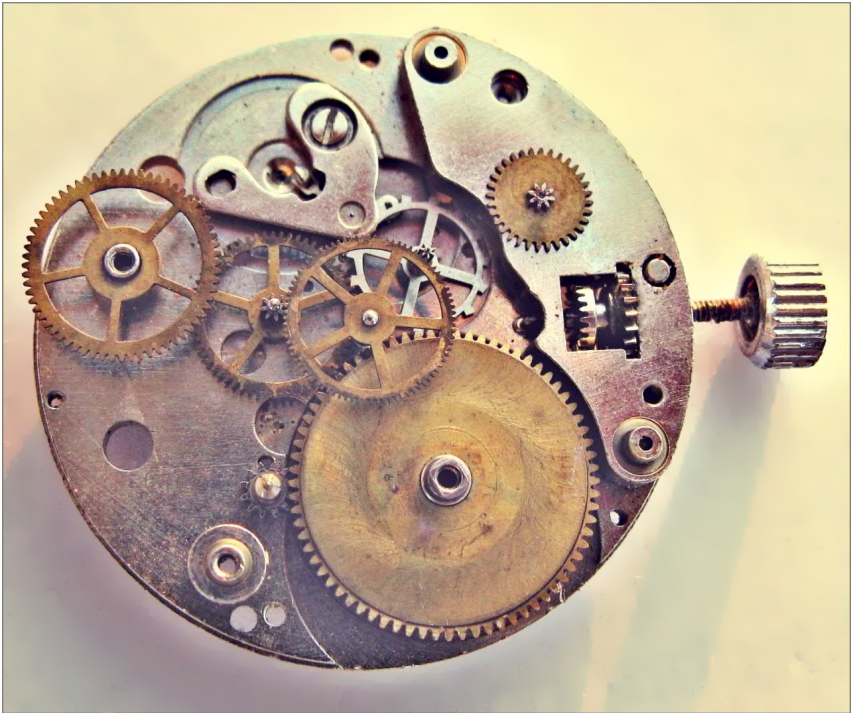


# Time and Time Again



**Etienne de L'Amour**

***Time and Time Again***

(a short novel, circa 50,000 words)

By Etienne de L'Amour

Book 6 in the Shadowlands series.

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# Dedication

Dedicated to the beloved genii for helping me out over the years, with my appreciation and respect.



“Speak to the walls so that the doors may hear.”

~ An ancient Sufi saying.



“If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must Man be of learning from experience.”

~ George Bernard Shaw, Irish dramatist & socialist (1856 – 1950).



# 1. What's on the cards

Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen didn't seem his usual, jovial self that day. For some reason he looked decidedly subdued and broody.

He'd left his office early that afternoon and sat at a table in the common room at *Foxholes* with a dog-eared deck of cards spread out before him, playing patience.

Tenzing was the spiritual director of the Tradition or Way as it was simply known and was also principal of *Foxholes*, an induction, orientation and study centre run by the Network, one of the executive wings of the mystical Tradition.

Many of those who passed through the doors at *Foxholes* came from outside the Freelands. Beyond the borders, places like the Outlands were so backward, life so hard and cruel and life expectancy so dismally low that these people came desperately seeking a better life, and one of the Network's chief aims was to help those in such plight. With strict border controls and draconian measures that made obtaining a work permit so difficult, many of these folk had to be smuggled into the country, given false identities and helped into work. For them the major objectives of the institution were to help them acclimatize and become familiar with the culture and intricacies of life in the Freelands and to provide them with a broad educational and more specific training foundation. And for some who expressed an interest in the spiritual, there were opportunities to taste what was on offer or to delve more deeply and perhaps actually embark on the Way. There being no compulsion in real traditions, however, this was purely optional. Indeed, the vast majority who passed through *Foxholes* were blissfully unaware that such higher realms of possibility were open to them, or of the dedication and hard work that it involved.

In this latter category – the spiritual – the Tradition was concerned with three main kinds of work: the actual process of spiritual development and eventual transformation, which was carried out by and for the individual aspirant, and which they termed the Work, with a capital “W”; their group activities they termed the work for the group, and the ancillary activities of

organizations such as the Network they termed the work for the Work. The work was always tailored to the needs of time, place, people and circumstance, and though the form and methodology had changed greatly in appearance over the years, the fundamentals had remained pretty much the same over the many centuries that the ancient Tradition had been active.

Randal Smith and Helen Wiggins sat at the table with Tenzing that afternoon, attempting to engage in light conversation, and there were two or three of the students there, enjoying a coffee and a chat between lectures.

Three times in a row Tenzing had come oh-so-close to completion, only to find himself stuck. Each time, the card he needed was either out of reach somewhere behind other upturned cards in the columns of the tableau or else there in plain view in the draw pile, which were turned over in groups of three, yet inaccessible, because he could never get it to the top of those groups of three.

“Such is life,” he resigned himself at length, gathering in the cards. “The old hands, with a good idea of what remains on the tableau and the draw pile, knowing what is contained in the discard pile and seeing what has thus far been laid in the foundations this time round; these old hands who’ve seen it all before, grow weary, though for those who can still remember, there is always a glimmer of hope ....

“Sometimes there is nothing for it but to gather in the cards, reshuffle the deck and deal them out again.”

That sounded heavy and ominous coming from Tenzing, who was usually so brim full of *joie de vivre*.

“Has this got something to do with the conference you mentioned the other day, Tenzing?” Helen asked him, growing concerned.

He nodded solemnly.

“I thought you said the conference was due to convene today,” she queried. “Did you decide not to attend?”

“The conference is ongoing as we speak,” Tenzing replied. “And, in spite of appearances to the contrary, I *am* in attendance.”

Helen was puzzled by this remark which didn't make sense to her.

“I didn't say that there would be a *physical* gathering, my

dear. There are more subtle lines of communication.” As he spoke, he waved his fingers in the air to suggest something ethereal passing between them, as if from heart to heart.

“Sometimes we are called upon to make hard decisions,” he said, leaving the table and ushering them across the room to sit by the fireside with him. “And sometimes circumstances so conspire as to make the decisions for one and force one to take an unpalatable course of action; a course of action that one would utterly reject given more favourable circumstances and other options.”

As they spoke, and as if in answer, a bright blue flash lit up the windows of the common room, making them jump. Moments later, the ground shuddered as a loud peel of thunder rang out through the study centre, and the heavens opened in a sudden deluge of rain.

“I always find that the air is so much more fresher and earthy after a good downpour,” Tenzing reflected philosophically. “You know, many years ago, before the two of you were born, there were three seasons of drought in the south which left the great forests as dry as a tinderbox. Wild fires spread through the area, destroying millions of acres of trees and casting the land into an almost perpetual state of gloom from all the smoke. It was so bad that there were many who fervently believed that the End Days had finally arrived. Yet look at the area now. The phoenix has indeed risen from those ashes.

“Did you know that many of the seeds will only come to germination through being subjected to the intense heat of those fires, and others only when subjected to extreme cold? There is so much fresh growth, and rare species that were once dwarfed, stifled and stunted by the giant trees again have a chance to show themselves and prosper ... for a time. And now the whole area has been thoroughly renewed and reinvigorated. So there is always hope, even when staring into the dark and devastating face of disaster.”

“Is this about the economic depression we're going through, or is some other great crisis looming?” Helen wanted to know.

“It's something quite different,” Tenzing replied. “And it would be better to see it first-hand rather than for me to attempt to explain it at this stage, and for you to come to prejudge what is a

complex issue.”

The fire in the hearth had begun to die down and Tenzing reached in the coal scuttle, selected a suitable log and gently placed it on the fire, poking around a little in the glowing embers to stir some life into them.

“See it first-hand?”

“I’ll be embarking on a journey on Saturday and expect to be away for a few weeks, and if you have nothing else planned, you’d be most welcome to accompany me.”

Helen looked to Randal and she to him, in order to gauge one-another’s reactions. “Well, we’re both between real jobs, but we do have occasional casual work. It’s barely sufficient for us to keep the wolves from the door ....”

Again they looked to one-another. “And with the recession, we have got ourselves stuck in a bit of a rut,” she added.

“The pot of gold always seems to be around the next corner,” Randal admitted. “And I’m beginning to wonder if such a thing exists at all ....”

“Men and their pet projects,” Helen remarked, raising her eyebrows. Then she turned back to Tenzing. “Yes, we’ll go anywhere. Especially anywhere that doesn’t have a socket and a phone line to plug a computer into.”

Randal was hesitant, then he replied: “You can say what you like, but the fact remains that ‘that blessed computer’ has already paid for itself ten times over.”

At that moment, Randal thought he heard a voice in his head say *And so have I – paid for it, that is*. And another voice seemed to ask “Has it paid for itself? *Has it really?* Doesn’t that rather depend on what criteria you apply to measure cost and benefit?” and that gave him much pause for thought.

“Forgive me, I was only joking,” Helen grinned, clutching Randal’s hand and reaching up to give him a sloppy kiss.

“I know the very place, and I’d be more than willing to pay you for your time,” Tenzing added, rising to his feet. “There’s no immediate rush, so I’ll leave the matter with you to discuss amongst yourselves.”

“Anyway,” he said, as they turned toward the door. “I have a whole heap of paperwork to wade through that I’ve been putting off for just such a rainy day as this, so if you’ll excuse me, we’ll



talk again later.”

## 2. The arrival of guests

The ominous, dark and heavy cloud that seemed to have been overshadowing Tenzing earlier that week appeared to have dramatically lifted by Wednesday when Helen and Randal next saw him. There he was in the corridor, chatting away quite merrily and animatedly to one of the young students before skipping off in the direction of his office. Helen was quick to point out to Randal that the director had a renewed spring in his step, though neither of them had the least idea of what might have brought about this sudden transformation. Whatever it was, it must have been something good and potent.

"I'll have a bottle of whatever Tenzing's on," Randal laughed, as they trotted down the corridor, catching up with the man just as he was entering his room.

"Do you really think you can bottle the essential?" Helen queried. Well, she had a point.

"Ah, my dear young friends," Tenzing lilted, hearing them approach and seeing who it was.

"Good morning, Tenzing," Helen smiled. "You wanted to see us. I was worried that it might be bad news, but clearly it can't be."

"Quite the contrary, Helen," Tenzing beamed back, opening the door to his office and ushering them in inside. "We have visitors arriving within the hour and I thought perhaps you might like to join us for a spot of lunch up the hill at *The Wayfarer's Rest*?" Carole and Wayne who ran the recently refurbished pub had themselves met when they were students at *Foxholes*, and remained good friends, true to the cause.

Helen pretended to wrestle Randal's arm up behind his back and he didn't put up much of a struggle. "Okay, okay, I submit. You've twisted my arm," he laughed, breaking free and tickling Helen under the ribs until she was on her knees and squirming.

At that moment, her timing as impeccable as ever, Matron knocked on the open door of the office and walked in. She did not look at all amused.

"Your guests have arrived, Director," she announced.

“Thank you, Matron,” Tenzing called after her as she turned on her heel and marched back down the corridor to her own office. As she left, the guests arrived: a sturdy looking guy about Randal's own age with close-cropped hair, droopy moustache and short beard and a petite lady, perhaps five years younger, with long jet black hair which fell in shiny waves and ringlets over her shoulders. They were both dressed in jeans and t-shirts and looked distinctly well-travelled. She was a natural beauty, with mesmerizing big hazel eyes and would probably have looked stunning dressed in a potato sack. Helen gave him a gentle nudge, bringing him out of his momentary reverie.

Seeing Tenzing there, the lady dropped her bags and came forward to hug him.

“Oh, it's so good to see you again,” Tenzing enthused, returning her embrace and turning to pump the man's hand vigorously. “Dzoldzaya and Conrad meet Helen and Randal, two fellow ex-students.”

They exchanged friendly greetings and sat together for a few minutes over a pot of tea and biscuits that Cook kindly wheeled in for them, then Dzoldzaya and Conrad took their bags and went off to find Matron to get sorted out with a room and freshen up ready for lunch.

While they were away, Tenzing explained that Dzoldzaya was his niece and that Conrad originally came from the Outlands. The pair now lived at *babs chu*, the retreat that the Tradition ran in the mountains of Narayana, Tenzing told them. He went on to explain that when Conrad was returning from the Outlands on a mission for the Network, his papers were discovered to be forgeries and he had been imprisoned for a time, for illegal entry into the Freelands, before being returned to the Outlands and finally making his way to Narayana. So assuming another forged identity to re-enter the Freelands and spend some time at *Foxholes*, he was running a grave risk.

When the couple returned a few minutes later, they looked transformed. Conrad had swapped his jeans for a pair of smart black corduroy trousers and black, open-necked shirt and Dzoldzaya had changed into a richly embroidered cheesecloth blouse and a brightly patterned ankle length floral skirt.

As they left the office, Randal headed off toward the foyer,

but Tenzing called him back. "The ground should be dry by now, Randal, so today I think we'll take the scenic route."

Rather than trudge up the road to the pub, Tenzing led them out of the main building through a side door and they cut across the grounds of *Foxholes* and through the gardens. They passed Seth Longbottom, the groundsman, on the way. He and a couple of students on work experience were hard at work turning over the soil in the flower beds.

"Top of the morning to you, friends," the man smiled, straightening himself up and touching the brim of his flat cap in salute, and they returned the greeting and stopped for a few moments while Tenzing chatted to them. With Tenzing, it wasn't simply a matter of making light conversation and *showing* interest, he actually *had* a real interest and extended this cordiality to folk of all ranks and walks of life. Sometimes you had to pay very close attention to what Tenzing was saying, because he could pack so much into a single sentence, hardly wasting a syllable, and even the most apparently casual remark could be loaded with deeper meaning.

Some of the more sensitive students had to deliberately distance themselves from the director at times, and some could only be taught indirectly, perhaps through deputies, finding his presence so intense and penetrating. On several occasions, Randal had been quite unnerved, suddenly finding himself feeling quite naked and vulnerable in Tenzing's eyes, and others would become utterly tongue-tied, despite the director's best efforts to make them feel relaxed and at home in his presence. It wasn't that he was vocally or emotionally intense, nor demanding: it was as if there were something concentrated in the air in his vicinity or like an aura of subtle yet potent energy around him. One or two of them, like Rosalie Muller, maintained that they could actually see this energy field, and not only in him but in all manner of other things, such as a child or a tree, an old house or some charged ritual implement. This was as yet far beyond Randal's capabilities, though Helen was showing the early, at times faltering signs of such development.

Clambering over a stile in the dry stone wall which ran round the perimeter of the grounds, they walked along a dirt path which ran alongside a narrow stream, skirting around the hill, then

turned off to follow another path which meandered its way up the hill through the trees.

“You know, it's getting on for two years since we first came here, Tenzing, and I had no idea that this path existed,” Helen remarked.

“How long is it since you were at *Foxholes*, Conrad?” Randal asked.

“Not since I was sent down for six months as an illegal alien,” Conrad replied. He looked to Dzoldzaya for assistance. “My mind's like a sieve, but Dzoldzaya is more organized and has a remarkable memory for such details.”

“Men,” Helen replied, with a feigned sigh.

“It's a matter of being present and paying attention, Connie; rather than being abstracted,” the lady explained, and thought for a moment. “That would make it almost six years.”

“And you've been at *babs chu* ever since?”

“Part of the time,” Dzoldzaya nodded. “But we've done quite a bit of travelling in Narayana, and of course I have family there. Correction: *we* have family there.”

“So how do you spend your time?”

“Oh, there's more than enough work to keep us busy,” replied Conrad. “We spent the first couple of years at *babs chu* studying and generally helping out around the place, but as Dzoldzaya says we've travelled a fair bit. The Network run a number of schools throughout Narayana and we've tried to do our bit, and we've also got a couple of writing projects on the boil: Dzoldzaya's been writing a book about the Narayani culture and mysticism and, coming from a family of storytellers, I've been collecting together many of the folk tales I acquired in the Outlands. Dzoldzaya's the real writer, though, and my editor-in-chief. I've provided her with the raw material and she's the one who's spiced it up and brought out the best in it.”

“Are the works close to completion?” Tenzing enquired, opening a gate ahead of them and ushering them through before carefully closing the gate behind them.

“Both are ready for you to have a look at, yes, Uncle.”

“And you have the manuscripts with you, I take it?”

“Yes.” Dzoldzaya laughed.

“Why the laugh?”

“Because these last six months, Conrad hasn't dare let the manuscripts out of his sight, and has insisted that we carry them with us wherever we go.”

“Call me paranoid if you like, my dear, but so much work has gone into the writing, it would be catastrophic if we were to lose that work.”

Dzoldzaya gave him a hug as they walked on up the hill. “I know, my love. I was only teasing you. Yes, some of the work is irreplaceable and I think you're very prudent.”

Randal agreed wholeheartedly. “I'm a programmer and, having learnt the hard way quite early on, I always, always keep a backup of my work.”

Helen laughed and gave him a friendly nudge. “My beloved Randal here is so paranoid that he even keeps backups of backups and never ever leaves all his floppy disks in the one place.”

“Believe me, it's no fun, nor any mean feat, to have to retype ten thousand lines of code.” Then: “I gather you're into programming yourself, Conrad,” Randal remarked.

“I was at one time,” the man nodded. “Deeply, madly. But I turned my back on that lark long ago. My life is a lot more simple and less fraught now.”

Again Helen nudged Randal. “You know, you might take a leaf out of Conrad's book,” she suggested.

Well, that was a thought, of course. His work did come between him and Helen at times. And yet if he wasn't programming, then heaven knows what else he'd find to fill the void. He was yet to discover any other hobby that he might excel at and pay his way.

Tenzing said nothing, but you could tell that he was taking in every word they uttered. He came to a stop ahead of them and waited until they caught up. He was rather sprightly, given that he was some years their senior. “Do you see anything?” he asked out of the blue.

They came to stand by him and looked around, shaking their heads one by one.

“Then follow me,” Tenzing requested. Leaving the path and pushing his way through the bushes, he climbed a short rise and disappeared from sight.

As they caught up with Tenzing, they saw before them a

large granite boulder with a rusty old iron gate attached to it. With the grind of unoiled hinges, Tenzing pushed the gate open and led the way inside. Before them, hidden from view amidst the dense undergrowth and trees, was a lily pond, surrounded by a rich tapestry of wild flowers.

“Welcome to the secret garden,” Tenzing smiled, offering them a seat on the strategically placed rocks around the pond, and they spent a few minutes simply drinking in the atmosphere there. Randal could have spent all day in that garden and did note a certain reluctance to move when it was time to leave.

“My last master and predecessor, Sonam – which means gifted or fortunate one – would bring me up to this secret garden on many an occasion,” Tenzing said at length as he led the way back out of the garden. “So this magical spot has a special place in my heart, all the more so having later sprinkled the old man's ashes around the garden when he died.”

“I didn't realize you'd been at *Foxholes* so long,” said Helen.

“Oh yes, Sonam brought the tradition here to the West from Narayana many years ago. He was quite a pioneer. And a consummate musician: true to his name, Sonam was a gifted and renowned concert pianist, and the melodies he played on the flute, his greatest joy, were so haunting. The sort that send a delicious quiver through you. He touched and opened so many hearts. You know, I can still hear him playing those divine melodies now, after all these years. That's one thing about the Tradition: when a real connection is made, it's never lost. It's something that transcends time and space.”

At length, they emerged from the trees. Skirting around a meadow, they reached the top of the hill and climbed over a stile to rejoin the road, and headed for the pub which was close by, nestling in amongst the trees.

“So, what will you have?” asked Tenzing as they sat in the snug studying the menus.

“What would you recommend?” asked Randal, unable to choose.

“I can heartily recommend the *rosan doshe*, if you like moderately hot and spicy food, lamb and pilau rice,” Tenzing replied. “It's based on a traditional Narayani dish, yet Carole and Wayne have, if anything, improved upon the recipe by

incorporating ingredients you can't get in the wilds of Narayana."

"Sounds good," Randal nodded, looking to Helen. She agreed.

"And what about you, Conrad?"

"Well, say what you like about my tastes, but it's been so long since I've tasted good old-fashioned western food: if it's okay with you, I'll settle for the steak and kidney pie, chips and peas."

Dzoldzaya laughed. "And you can call me old-fashioned, but I'm with the others: the *rosan doshe* for me, please."

"Good, that's settled then. Randal, maybe you could come to the bar with me and we'll get a round of drinks in? Carole and Wayne always have a bottle of *chungari* stashed away under the bar for occasions such as this."

Tenzing regaled them with stories as they were waiting for their meals to arrive:

*A spiritual master, Pir-o-Shojan, passed away from this mortal coil one day to join the choir invisible, and a week later one of his close disciples also died and found himself in paradise. The first thing he asked one of the higher beings when he arrived was "Where is my master, Pir-o-Shojan? I have to see him. Having led such a pious and faithful life, he must surely be enjoying the most lavish fruits of paradise."*

*As soon as he uttered these words, he was transported and in an instant he found himself in a marvellous walled garden. Sure enough, there was his master, sitting on a sofa in the shade of an ancient oak tree. And it came as no surprise to the disciple to see the most voluptuous, scantily-dressed maiden sitting on his master's lap.*

*"Oh, Pir-o-Shojan, Peacock of the Universe, Pole Star of the Age. Heavens be praised. I always knew that you were the greatest and that you would find ample reward in paradise." And the disciple went on in this vein for some time.*

*At length, shaking his head sadly, Pir-o-Shojan raised his hand to speak.*

*"My son, this fair damsel is not my reward," the master explained. "You see, on the contrary, I am her punishment..."*

"And there's more," Tenzing smiled.

*One day, the wise fool Wally was walking down the lane*



*near his house when a goat walked up to him with a book in his mouth. It was a copy of the Good Book which he'd mislaid weeks earlier on a trip to a town, and he'd lost all hope of finding it again.*

*"Heaven be praised!" Wally cried. "It's a miracle!"*

*"Not really," replied the goat, shaking his head. "I saw your name in the front of the book."*

Just as they began to tuck into their meal, two old ladies came in and took a table not far from the snug and their conversation was so loud, narrow-minded and quite bizarre, that the group couldn't help but overhear and feel the urge to listen in. Their conversation was peppered with prefabricated and proverbial turns of phrase strung together almost at random and yet strangely coherent:

"And what do you think?"

"Well there's nowt the likes of us can do about it."

"Leave that to the Powers That Be, that's what our Knobby says."

"Aye, ours not to reason why."

"Personally, I blame the parents."

"They haven't got the sense they were born with."

"I mean, what a carry on. And a man of his age."

"And as for Robin. Well, there's nowt as queer as folk."

"Dirty goings on, Nora."

"He didn't, did he? Well, I never did. The cheek of it."

"And after all we've done for them."

"Scandalous, if you ask me."

"It shouldn't be allowed."

"What they need is a right good thrashing."

"There should be a law against that sort of hanky-panky."

"I mean, whatever next?"

"I don't know what the world's coming to, Gertie, I really don't."

"I tell you, I was absolutely mortified."

"Saints preserve us."

"Thank the Good Lord we'll be dead and buried before things get much worse, that's all I can say."

"Aye, and God help them as follows on ...."

Being all too human themselves, they couldn't help but

snigger behind their hands; though Tenzing did gently remind them that the world was a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected. "What some see only in their meditations on some distant mountain peak, we see in the simple salt shaker on the table and in the alleyways and the gutters of everyday life," he added.

Their meal finally over, the five of them took a leisurely stroll back down the hill through the trees and again took the opportunity to rest for a time in the tranquil setting of the secret garden to allow their lunch to settle. Tenzing went into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a wooden flute. The instrument came in three pieces which he carefully screwed back together.

"Yes, this is my master's flute, and I trust that the spirit moves me and I am able to do it justice today," he told them, and he began to play. Launching into an old Narayani folk tune, as they listened in thrilled silence, Tenzing did not disappoint. He played for nearly half an hour, rounding off with his personal favourite, a piece that Sonam had written himself. As Randal watched Tenzing play, the old man's features appeared to change and for a few moments it was as if he had actually become someone else or was perhaps benevolently possessed by his master's spirit. And as Tenzing brought his playing to a close, so that vision slowly faded away and Tenzing was himself once more.

Finally, wiping away a tear from his cheek, Tenzing carefully dismantled the flute, returned it to his pocket and they made their way quietly out of the secret garden and off down the hill toward *Foxholes*.

### 3. Eastward bound

The following Saturday morning, Randal was abruptly awoken by the sound of Helen clambering up the steep wooden steps. With their financial affairs in such a sorry state, they still hadn't got around to carpeting the house.

“Morning, sleepy head. Rise and shine,” she lilted, placing a steaming hot cup of coffee on the bedside table and giving him a peck on the forehead.

Randal lay there for a few moments, getting his bearings and wiping the sleep from his eyes. It had gone one o'clock in the morning by the time they'd finished packing and he'd been too excited to sleep well. Well, he had no option but to get up, so he threw down the bedclothes to force himself to move. He struggled out of bed and staggered across the floor, flicking open an edge of the curtains to peer outside. The stars were just beginning to fade from the night sky, and over to the east the horizon was lit up with the zodiacal lights of the false dawn that preceded the rising of the sun by an hour or so. It was far too early to be up and about, but then they had promised Tenzing that they'd be ready and waiting for him when he arrived to pick them up in his car.

He had a quick slurp of his coffee and a few hasty drags on a stale cigarette left over from the night before, soon realizing by the foul taste that this was not at all a good idea and stubbing the cigarette butt out, then headed for the bathroom. Helen was always up earlier than him, and the shower was free. One thing she had a habit of doing was turning on the cold tap in the kitchen to fill the kettle or flushing the loo, so he was always on his guard and ready to duck out of the way should the water suddenly become unbearably hot.

Tenzing was there just as the sun began to rise and Randal wolfed down the last of his cereal as Helen hovered over him, ready to collect his dish so that she could wash it. And while she was finishing up in the kitchen and going round making doubly sure that everything was switched off and the windows securely locked, Randal helped Tenzing load up the back of his estate car with their bulky luggage. Tenzing hadn't told them where they

were going, but he had advised them to take along plenty of warm clothing and stout footwear.

It took the best part of the day to arrive at their first destination. They drove down south through the rolling countryside and rich farmland of the Freelands, then turned toward the east through the great forests and across the barren moors, staying the night at a tiny guest house nestling in a lush green valley on the fringe of the moors.

To the north lay Tenzing's homeland of Narayana, to the south lay the theocratic republic of Gilgamar, and between the two lay the moorland and valleys. They called this region Lilith and though it had a measure of autonomy over everyday affairs, for some years now it had been a protectorate of the Freelands and a buffer zone. If there was ever another war, then the Freelanders hoped that it would be fought here and not on their own sacred turf.

It was very late by the time the group arrived at the guest house. Tenzing had phoned ahead before they set out to make sure that there were rooms and to let their host know that they wouldn't be there before nine in the evening at the earliest. So, being quite tired, within half an hour of the supper that the landlady thoughtfully provided, they turned in for the night. Randal shut his eyes as soon as his heavy head hit the pillow, though Helen was still feeling quite perky.

"Hewwo, wickle sweepy head," she cooed in his ear.

He made no response.

"Hello, is there anybody in there?" she enquired in his ear, tapping him lightly on the side of the head.

"The lights are on, but there's nobody at home," he whispered back, still reluctant to open his eyes and slowly drifting off to sleep.

Helen did her best to rouse him, but Randal was already too far away to really notice, and he finally fell fast asleep, dreaming that he was making love.

What was even more surreal was that when he awoke again, after what seemed like only a few moments but was actually several hours, Helen was again awake, licking her tongue around his ear to tempt him, only this time as he became more and more aroused, so he gradually returned to waking consciousness.

“Mmm, come here, gorgeous,” he grinned, taking Helen in his arms and giving her a warm and welcoming cuddle.

“Good morning, handsome,” Helen cooed. She nestled her head against his chest and they lay there for some time simply relaxing before finally and reluctantly stirring their stumps.

They were up early again that day to travel south across the border into Gilgamar. Only now did Tenzing reveal that this was their intended destination, though for reasons presumably known only to him, he still remained unforthcoming when queried about the purpose of their visit.

Did he have a plan, they asked? Simply to tour around the area and get a feel for the place, its people and for how things were, was the closest they came to an explanation from him.

By midday, having passed through half a dozen sleepy little hamlets, they came to a village and found a tea house to enjoy a freshly made sandwich, a strawberry tart with whipped cream, and a refreshing cup of tea, and after lunch they had a stroll through a nearby park before returning to the high street.

They found a crowd of people on the village green on their return and Tenzing decided that they might go and find out what the event was all about. They could see the head of a man at the focus, a good foot higher than the crowd, so presumably he was standing on something. Judging by the way he was flailing his arms about, the man was there to harangue the crowd on some subject, and the three of them walked across the green to hear for themselves.

The preacher stood on his upturned soap box which served as a makeshift pulpit, and puffed out his chest. “Verily, I say unto you: nothing other than God has any real existence,” he called out loudly, thumping the air with his fist. “All else is subject to decay, corruption and, sooner or later, to annihilation. All else is nothing more substantial than a mental or emotional phantasmagoria. All else is transient, only God abides.”

Oh Lord, here we go, sighed Randal, exchanging glances with Helen, who said nothing but shook her head. The man was all wound up like a toy soldier.

“So do not dally here or hanker after the calm and peaceful and comfortable life. Why waste your time on this detritus? Turn your back on this nest of vipers. Turn your back on the sinful and

iniquitous. Do not wait until the End Days, for I say unto you, the Hour is here and the Hour is now. Welcome each and every opportunity that arises to annihilate your wicked, base self. Do not deny but rather relish those heaven-sent opportunities. Relentlessly and remorselessly scour the rust from the mirror of your soul.”

“You know, this man reminds me of the nationalist, Lucian George,” Helen whispered in his ear. “Even though they serve apparently different causes.”

“Turn away,” the preacher continued, stabbing the air with his fist. “Turn away I tell you, and give the Lord thy God your undivided attention and your total commitment. Love none other than God Almighty, forsaking all others, except to the extent indicated by the Work.”

They stood there, listening as the man entranced and enticed the masses with the mouth-watering prospect of rewards for the faithful; this in the one breath whilst in the next, almost hopping up and down with frenzy, he spewed forth all manner of dire warnings of red-hot coals, brimstone and treacle for the unbelievers.

As the man was preaching, Tenzing quietly drew Randal and Helen's attention to a young woman in the crowd. She was shaking her head from side to side and dabbing away the tears that welled up in her eyes; and it was clear that they were not tears of joy nor ecstatic transportation, quite the reverse.

When the preacher had finished and the rapturous applause of the crowd had died away, he stood down from the soap box. Almost overcome by the force of his own delivery, and mopping his sweating brow, he was gently led away by a group of his close supporters.

“Friends,” the woman called out, though her voice was hardly more than a hoarse whisper amidst the hubbub of conversation. “Friends, the zealots tell you to turn your back on this world and to abandon all else – *all else* – other than love and selfless devotion to their god, whom they call the One and Only God. They tempt you with their talk of eternal bliss and the abundance of gifts with which their god rewards the faithful, and warn of the eternal torments their loving and merciful god has in store for the unbelievers. If a man or woman of good heart would

not wish such terrors upon his or her worst enemies, then how could it be that a wise and omniscient and loving god such as they describe should subject his children to such abuse?"

Was the woman suggesting the unthinkable, wondered Randal? That the emperor might have no clothes?

Two or three of the crowd appeared interested in hearing what this moderate voice had to say, but most merely leered at her or muttered obscenities.

"Yes, I say, love Spirit with all your heart, but also celebrate all that is good and wholesome in this world and in the worlds beyond, and give your love to your family and friends and all who are deserving or in need – for these, too, are a part of Spirit's wonderful bounty. Yes, I say, love Spirit, but do not sign away your life for an eternity of self-deprivation and slavery, even if that slavery be to one such as their god."

"Let me tell you, friends, it does *not* have to be this way. Their way is not the only true way. Do not deny and abandon Our Lady, who has cared for us and nurtured us since time immemorial; do not deny and abandon us, her children."

"Blasphemer!" someone yelled at her.

"Witch!" called another.

She struggled on valiantly against the growing hubbub of dissent. "I come here not to bind you, as would these zealots, but to set you free from such tyranny and oppression. Not to urge you as do these zealots to flagellate and deny and annihilate the self and to love only God, but rather to transform your self and to work *with* Spirit."

"Stone the blasphemer!"

By this time, the crowd were heckling the young woman more and more and some were jostling her and tearing at her clothes, so that at length she fell silent. Sensing the growing anger of the crowd, Tenzing rooted his car keys out of his pocket and tossed them in Helen's direction. "Get the car started," he requested quite loudly, jolting Randal to his senses.

Then Tenzing turned and pushed his way through the crowd and took hold of the woman by the arm. Forcing his way back through the throng, he guided her toward the car. Opening the front passenger door he thrust her inside, quite without ceremony, then dashed round to the driver's side and clambered in beside

her. Rather than having separate driver and passenger seats, Tenzing's old estate car had one long front seat like a settee, so there was ample room. They drove away up the road until they were well clear of the crowd, which came surging after them.

"Where do you live?" Tenzing asked urgently.

The woman pointed a finger out of the window ahead and to her left. "The wooden framed house over there with all the washing on the lines."

Tenzing looked in the rear-view mirror and saw that the crowd was still coming their way and shouting angrily.

"Do you have relatives there?"

The woman shook her head. "No, I live alone."

"Damn it, there's no time. We'll have to drive on."

They went a few hundred yards further down and Tenzing got Helen to bring the car to a stop for a moment. The crowd had abandoned the chase, but they were clustered in the road near the woman's house.

"Should we go yet?" Helen wanted to know.

"Give it a minute or two," Tenzing advised.

Within moments, they could see wisps of smoke coming from the vicinity of the house. It looked like they'd set the place alight.

"Well, that settles that. Do you have relatives in the area?" Tenzing wanted to know.

Again the woman shook her head. "No, I was orphaned as a child."

"Where are we heading?" asked Helen.

Tenzing pointed. "Keep on going for about three miles until you come to a fork in the road. Then turn off to the right. I'll give you further directions when we're nearer our destination."

"Okay."

"Who are you?" the woman finally asked them when they were clear of the village and a little more settled.

"We're friends," Tenzing smiled reassuringly and he introduced her to Randal and Helen. It turned out that her name was Miriam and that she earned her living taking in other people's laundry to wash and iron, and she made odd alterations and repairs to clothes.

"That preacher and his followers, Miriam: who are they?"



“They call themselves *Hujardi*,” which means ‘Warriors of God,’” she told them, “though they are referred to by some – safely out of their hearing – as *Hojardi*, which means ‘hot heads.’”

“Are they from around these parts?”

“I’m told that they started coming into Gilgamar from Erigwid, beyond our southern border, nine months to one year ago.”

“For what purpose? To spread word of their religion?”

Miriam waved her arms in the air. “If that is all they intended, then perhaps I’d be more accommodating toward them. But, alas, they have a more worrying objective, which is to convert the lands to their religion, either through peaceful means or, failing that, through the use of force. They recognize only their own religion and see all others as illegitimate and corrupting. Elsewhere, where they are in greater numbers, I’m told that the Hujardi have imposed harsh laws upon the people and shut down, even destroyed, the places of worship of other faiths and denominations.”

“How is that these people have managed to get a foothold here?” asked Tenzing.

“Well, the problem is that there *is* truth in some of the things they say. The theocracy that has reigned over Gilgamar for several centuries now, imposes tithes upon the people, abducts our children to work as serfs and deifies its members at the highest ranks. Their system is in part corrupt, those who serve and supply the theocrats in the rat- and disease-infested shanty towns on the fringes of the forbidden temple-cities even more so, and the land further afield is often lawless and poverty-stricken. The Hujardi have gained many converts amongst the people, especially amongst the poor and downtrodden, who have grown so numerous.”

Tenzing nodded gravely. “I see.”

“The country is very backward,” Miriam added, “and the last thing we need is for these fundamentalist zealots to drag us further back into the Dark Ages.”

“The Dark Ages?” prompted Tenzing.

“This was a time when nine out of ten of the population were serfs, tied to the land, and classed and counted amongst the livestock, goods and chattels of the feudal warlords. The tiny

plots of land allocated to the serfs were barely enough to sustain them, even in the good years. At that time, over a third of the country was forested and the forests teemed with game, wild boar, deer and wolves, but the serfs were forbidden to hunt, forage or settle there. Those who were caught faced the most severe penalties. Many had their fingers chopped off or their ankles broken; others were blinded by searing hot pokers, castrated or hung; and some were decapitated and had their heads skewered on wooden stakes driven into the ground and left on display to serve as a warning to others. If you were born a serf in those dark times, there was no hope of progress, and a serf you remained until the day you died.

“Even now, whilst good folk go hungry and sleep by the gutter, the theocrats have such a surfeit of wealth that they adorn their buildings with gold and encrust them with precious gems, so little has really changed.

“And it could get a lot worse once more. These things the zealots are trying to foist onto the people smack more of the Dark Age human mind than the revealed word of a god. They are the heaven-bound holy warrior elite and we their serfs. The only thing that changes from time to time is the name of the lord such people serve. How's the saying go? 'Out of the frying pan into the fire'?”

“This was all predicted many years ago, at one of the conferences,” Tenzing informed them. “When the people go without work and poverty sweeps across the lands, a hot wind will blow from the south ....”

“The Hujardi?” asked Helen rhetorically.

“... And when missionary zeal reaches its zenith, a fierce blast of cold wind will arrive from the far east.”

“And what is that?”

Tenzing shrugged. “Only time will tell.” Then: “Pull the car over would you, Helen? I think perhaps I should drive. Miriam, you and Helen sit in the back and Randal, you come up front with me.”

What had crossed Tenzing's mind as he said this, Randal could not fathom, but though Helen was looking a little bemused at this abrupt change in seating arrangements, Randal trusted Tenzing's intuitions implicitly, and they were indeed about to find

out why.

Approaching the town of Yod Kidaw, Tenzing caught sight of a group of men up ahead and slowed the car. As he came closer, one of the group waved his rifle, signalling to the driver that he should pull over to the side of the road. Tenzing fumbled inside the glove compartment and retrieved his old service revolver and spare bullets, tucking the gun into his belt.

"In the name of God, welcome," they greeted one-another as the group came up to the car, but they soon got down to business.

"Open the boot," the one who appeared to be their leader requested. Then: "Out, out. Everybody out."

They had no option but to comply.

"Under the laws of the Hujardi Religious Council, it is forbidden to possess or use certain commodities," the man told them. He reeked of body odour and wore cheap perfume. Perhaps he didn't realize that you were meant to use the stuff *after* washing your armpits and not instead of this basic act? "Do you have anything to declare?"

"Such as?" queried Randal.

"Alcohol is forbidden. Drugs are forbidden unless prescribed by a Hujardi doctor. Tobacco is forbidden. Coffee is forbidden. Musical instruments are forbidden. Jewellery is forbidden. Wrist watches are permitted but, like clothes, must be purely functional and not decorative ...." the man recited, reading off a long list of contraband and rules which he'd apparently memorized by constant repetition.

As he spoke, another of their number searched them one by one. First Randal had his tobacco confiscated and then they found his precious Blue Mountain coffee in the trunk of the car.

"In the first event, these will be confiscated," the man explained, "though I must warn you that subsequent infringements of Hujardi Law will result in punishment as directed by the Hujardi Criminal Tribunal."

These people were a law unto themselves.

When they came to search Tenzing, of course, they found the gun, and Randal sucked his breath in, waiting for their response, but their leader simply dismissed it. It seemed that there wasn't an edict concerning the carrying of weaponry.

Finally, though they had been first in the queue, the men

turned their attentions to Miriam and Helen.

“Women, here you are on public display and I am asking you, where are your masks?”

“What masks?” asked Helen in all innocence.

“All females past the age of puberty are to cover their faces whilst in public and must be accompanied at all times by a male relative.” He pointed to the others: “Who is your relative?”

Miriam pointed to Tenzing. “He is my uncle,” she lied.

“And mine,” replied Helen, though to Randal she didn't sound particularly convincing: telling lies was certainly not Helen's forte. It was to be hoped that the Hujardi didn't check through their documents.

“And where are your masks?”

“I didn't know that I had to wear one, and I have nothing to cover myself with ....” said Miriam, with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Ignorance of the Law is no defence,” the man snapped back at her, standing there with his hands on his hips. For a moment, Randal feared the worst, but then the man turned to his comrade who produced two objects from his back pack. They were made of flimsy white plastic and shaped like a human face, with holes cut out for the eyes, the nostrils and the mouth, though not for the ears since the mask didn't go that far back. It looked like the lower section could be removed to allow one to eat or drink. Attached to them was a length of white elastic to hold the contraptions in place.

“Without a mask, we cannot allow you to pass into the town.”

Miriam reluctantly held out her hand, expecting him to hand one of the objects to her.

“We have our needs ....” the man replied, as if that explained anything.

Tenzing got the drift and rummaged in his pocket for some change. “How much?” he enquired.

“One hundred dagma,” the man requested.

Tenzing pocketed the change and went into his jacket pocket for his wallet. Pulling out two fifty dagma notes, he took the masks from the man and passed them on to Miriam and Helen.

Miriam hesitated for a moment, then pulled her long blond

hair back, slid the mask on over her head and stood there. Reluctantly, Helen followed suit. They might have been fuming behind the masks, but all they could see of them was the blank expression of two shop window mannequins.

“Don't you have any masks with happy, smiling faces?” asked Helen. She was pushing her luck and Randal was screaming at her inside to be more compliant, not that she could hear.

“That would be inappropriate. Such an expression might be misconstrued as an amorous invitation.” The man clapped his hands together. “Right, off you go and God be with you. Mind you adhere to the Hujardi Law at all times and remember that God sees all.”

“Thank you,” Miriam said, turning to Tenzing when they were under way again.

“Under normal circumstances, I'd reply 'you're welcome', and indeed you are, Miriam, though on this occasion, perhaps it's more apt to reply: 'Thank you for *what?*'”

The masks certainly did the pair of them no favours and there were others on the street going about their shopping under male escort, looking like forlorn wind-up clockwork dolls. As for the males, it appeared that for them there was no dress code, and many of them were strutting their stuff in trendy western clothes.

Tenzing drove on through town, then slowed the car and pulled in on a grass verge beside the road, not far from a clutch of old stone buildings. “Well, here we are,” he announced as they alighted from the car. “We'll stay here for the night and see what morning brings. Let's go inside and get warm, and I'll see if there's somewhere better to park. Randal, give me a hand with the luggage, would you?”

“Yes, squire, what can I get you?” asked the landlord as they walked up to the bar. He was quite a thin, round-shouldered man with a potato nose, a smile from ear to ear and a highly polished bald head, reminding Helen of a comedian she'd once seen at a local theatre.

“Good evening, sir. We could do with a couple of rooms for the night for four people, something to eat, and also a nice cold tankard of your best Gilgamarn mead, perhaps?” Tenzing greeted him, putting down the heavy suitcases he was carrying. “Though

not necessarily in that order.”

“Well, the rooms I can certainly help out with, and the food we can have ready for you by six o'clock. As for the drink, I'm afraid that we're no longer permitted to sell alcoholic drinks under the new Hujardi Law,” the man replied loudly. He pointed to a semi-literate poster on the back wall of the bar, issued by the Hujardi and bearing a prohibition and stark warning concerning the consumption of alcohol.

Wouldn't a person bleed to death if they tore out his tongue?

“I can offer you tea, but alas not coffee. I know,” the man said with a shrug of his shoulders, “it makes no sense whatsoever, but what can we do?”

“Later, perhaps,” Tenzing suggested.

There were disgruntled murmurings from a number of the regulars seated around the bar.

The landlord rooted out a couple of old brass keys and handed them to Tenzing. “Rooms 6 and 7, right at the top of the stairs. If you'd like to freshen up, you'll find fresh towels and soap there and I'll send someone up with warm water.”

They thanked the man and headed upstairs. It looked like Randal would get to bed down with Tenzing that night and Helen with Miriam.

A few minutes after, a young girl, probably the landlord's daughter judging by her looks, tapped courteously on the door and brought them a large jug of hot water for the washing bowls. As she was leaving, another tap came at the door and a youth entered at their bidding, carrying a second large jug and four pottery tankards. “With my father's compliments,” the lad smiled, placing the jug and tankards on a small table under the window. “Don't bring your empties down to the bar, mind: I'll collect them later.”

“Many thanks,” Tenzing nodded, raising his eyebrows. “And mum's the word.”

Tenzing fished in his pocket and pressed a couple of coins into the lad's hand. “One for you and one for the young lady,” he smiled.

The first thing Helen and Miriam did when they were once again alone was take off the infernal white masks. Even though it was quite a cold day out, the plastic didn't allow their skin to

breathe, and their faces were glistening with sweat underneath.

After they'd eaten their fill, they left the bar where the meals were served and went through to the lounge. Television had yet to reach Gilgamar, but there was a wireless set – an old valve-driven radio – there. Tenzing was keen to listen to some news and light entertainment, and he switched the radio on, let it warm up and spent some time twiddling with the knobs, but all he could get was a radio station based in the nearest city, Om Dor, and run by the Hujardi. Not wishing for the others to be subjected to the nauseating propaganda and bombarded by endless prohibitions, he switched the set off and returned to sit with them. Then he caught sight of the collection of board games on a shelf in the corner of the room and went to see what was on offer.

“Aha!” he beamed, pulling out one of the battered cardboard boxes. “Anyone fancy a game of Sleuth?” He scanned the remaining boxes. “Or Babbage, if you prefer? You know, I haven't played Sleuth in years. Call me old-fashioned if you like, but ever since the advent of the television, such traditional family pastimes have become less and less popular, and families and friends more distant.”

“Sure, why not,” they agreed, nodding enthusiastically.

“Once upon a time,” Tenzing continued, “people would host competitive games at their houses and invite family, friends and neighbours. The houses would be heaving with folk. Then they'd send someone out to buy a fish and chip supper for everyone. But sadly that sort of thing simply doesn't happen these days. The old community spirit seems to have gone down the plug hole.”

“Anyhow, on a brighter note: who wants to play the games master for the first round? Helen? No other takers? Right you are, Helen it is, then. Over to you, my dear.”

## 4. Bumps in the night

Back at *Foxholes*, Matron had just finished her nightly rounds, making sure that all the fire doors were securely shut and the younger students safely tucked up in bed. It was already late, but she still had some leftover paperwork to complete, so she headed back toward her office just off the main corridor leading from the front foyer.

As Matron sat down at her desk and carefully positioned a sheet of carbon paper between two forms and fed the sandwich into her manual typewriter, she thought she heard a bump. It sounded like it came from the director's study adjacent to her own office, which was altogether strange, as he'd been away since Friday afternoon and wouldn't be back for weeks.

Swinging round in her chair, she rose to her feet and poked her head out of the door to peer down the corridor. Well, there was no light showing under the director's door; but again she heard a dull thump.

"Hello? Who's in there?" she called out, striding down the short passage toward the study. There was no reply, but again there came a thump.

Matron took a deep breath, grasped hold of the brass handle and pushed the door open with one hand whilst fumbling around with the other to find the light switch. Her heart thumping heavily in her chest, she cast her eyes around. The room was deserted.

A slight movement in Matron's peripheral vision caught her attention and her heart leapt for a moment. She clasped her hand to her chest and breathed a deep sigh of relief, realizing that it was just the long curtain by the glass door swirling in the breeze, and again there was that same dull thud. She realized now that one of the cleaners must have left the glass door open to air the room and forgotten to close it when she left. And there she was thinking *Foxholes* might have intruders. Mystery solved, thank heavens. She strode across the room and reached through the curtain to pull the glass door to and securely lock it.

Just as she was turning to switch out the light and leave the room, she caught sight of a figure looming in the doorway.



“Saints preserve me!” she gasped, staggering backward.

“It's all right, Matron, it's only me,” came a voice and she saw now that it was just Conrad, Dzoldzaya's husband.

Again, Matron clasped her hand to her heart. “Oh, young man, you gave me such a fright, creeping up like that. I was already wound up thinking that I had heard an intruder in here, but it turned out to be merely the glass door banging in the wind.”

Conrad sucked in his lip and looked suitably sheepish. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, Matron. I'm just putting the finishing touches to a manuscript and there's a word I need to look up. As the library's locked up for the night, I thought Tenzing might have a dictionary in here.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I'll leave you to it and bid you goodnight,” Matron smiled, having recovered her composure, and with that she was off back to her office to complete her paperwork before turning in for the night.

Just as he'd hoped, Tenzing did indeed have a suitable etymological dictionary and, since the ancient tome was so heavy and he didn't want to risk breaking the spine, he took the book and went to sit at Tenzing's desk to study it at his leisure.

As he opened the tome, a cardboard bookmark fell out and he reached down under the desk to retrieve it. Straightening himself up, he returned the bookmark, and only then did it register that the socket under Tenzing's desk was switched on, though the computer itself was switched off. He bent down again and clicked the switch off. Call him paranoid if you like, but where electrical appliances are concerned, he felt it better to be safe than sorry.

He felt around the back of Tenzing's old monitor to make sure that was switched off, not that it really mattered any more. It was simply a barely-conscious habit he'd got into. And then he noticed a rather odd thing: the monitor felt quite warm and must have been used only just recently. In itself that meant little, but one thing he did know: it wouldn't have been Matron using the machine. She abhorred such newfangled gadgets and steadfastly refused to use anything more technologically advanced than her trusty old manual typewriter and the spirit duplicator.

Out of curiosity, Conrad closed the dictionary, laid it to one side, switched the computer on again and waited impatiently for the thing to boot up.

When he finally got past the welcome screens, he brought up the command line interpreter and tapped in a command. A ream of white text scrolled up the screen and was largely lost, so he patiently typed in the command again and added a switch at the end to page the output. That way he could read what was on the screen and press the space bar each time he was ready to move on.

What was displayed was a list of recently opened files, starting with the most recent. He looked at the screen and then at his watch. All the rest of the entries were from Friday afternoon before Tenzing had gone away, but the top six were files that had been opened just ten to fifteen minutes ago. It was inconceivable that Matron should have been on the machine, yet who else could it have been, in Tenzing's private study and this late at night?

Conrad felt in his jacket pocket and produced a piece of paper and a pen and made a careful note of the file names. He brought them up one by one in a text editor to check their contents. They all contained sensitive details about Network operations and the last listed the names, addresses and other personal information about Network operatives. None of the files were even password protected, let alone encrypted.

Conrad noticed that there was a floppy disk still inserted, which was another strange thing: Tenzing had learnt the hard way that if you left a disk in one of these older drives when you switched off the machine, there was a strong chance that the recording head would drop on the disk and damage it.

He brought up the file manager and had a look at the disk's directory. Sure enough, there were the six latest files, already copied to the disk, so it looked like there had been an intruder and that they'd been disturbed, probably by Matron. Either an intruder or a spy: they never had caught the spy who tried to send a message by carrier pigeon some while ago. Thankfully Seth Longbottom, the groundsman, had shot the bird as it flew over the grounds.

Chances were, if they'd been disturbed, they might come back to retrieve the disk or recopy the files. Well, Conrad couldn't stay up all night and it was far too late to get hold of any of the others, so the best thing he could do was to check that the copies on the floppy disk were still intact and temporarily delete those

files from Tenzing's machine, and find a similar blank disk to return to the drive, then worry about the matter in the morning.

Conrad had just slipped the good disk into his inside pocket and was returning the dictionary to the shelf when he felt a crashing blow to the back of his head and his vision was illuminated with brief, blinding lightning flashes. Then the lights abruptly went out, he slumped to the ground and knew no more.



The next thing Conrad was aware of was being shaken, though not roughly. His eyes shot open and he looked frantically around him, not knowing where he was, nor what was going on, and with a splitting headache.

"Conrad, Conrad?" came a voice. It was Dzoldzaya, down on her knees beside him, with a concerned expression etched across her face. Only then did he see that he was laid out on the plush Eastern carpet of Tenzing's study and suddenly realized what must have happened.

"Are you all right, Conrad?" Dzoldzaya asked him, stroking his hair.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position and smiled to reassure her. "Sure. I have the most awful headache but, yes, I'm still in the land of the living."

"What happened? Did you fall?"

Taking Dzoldzaya's proffered hand, he pulled himself to a standing position and staggered over to the settee to sit down for a few minutes while he fully regained his senses. Dzoldzaya went to sit beside him, clutching his hand, and he began to explain what little he knew.

She cut him off mid-sentence. "First things first, is there anything I can get you?"

"An aspirin or two for my head wouldn't go amiss," he replied.

Dzoldzaya fished in her bag, found a little brown bottle, unscrewed the top and shook a couple of tablets out into her hand. She passed them over and momentarily left the office to fetch a glass of water to wash them down.

"I take it Matron's already gone to bed?"

"I should say so, Conrad. It's half two in the morning."

"Crikey, have I been out for that long?"

“You must have been. I had to get up to answer the call of nature and noticed you weren't in bed, so I thought I'd come and see what you were up to.”

He explained what little he knew and Dzoldzaya became visibly alarmed. “With Uncle and his deputy, Harold Grainger both away – God knows where – Rosalie Muller is in charge. We have to let her and Matron know about what's happened.”

He got to his feet and walked about a bit, slowly regaining his balance. “There's nothing any of us can do tonight, beloved. I suggest we turn in for the night and see what tomorrow brings.”

Dzoldzaya got up from the settee and went to examine his head. “Well, there's a bit of blood and you're going to have an almighty lump and bruise on the back of your head. Late or not, maybe we should get Matron to have a look? She's a trained nurse.”

Conrad felt the back of his head and flinched. It felt quite sore. “No, I think I'll be okay,” he said, taking Dzoldzaya's hand and leading her from the room. “I'm not suffering from blurred or double vision or anything; I'm not feeling sick, and the dizziness has disappeared. Let's go to bed.”

Suddenly a thought struck him. He went back to Tenzing's desk and checked the computer disk drive. Sure enough, the blank disk had been removed. Digging into his inside pocket, he breathed a sigh of relief, finding the real disk still there.

## 5. A meeting is called

They called an urgent meeting with Rosalie Muller, Matron, the caretaker and the groundsman the next day, just after breakfast, and talked the matter through for some time, but didn't really get very far.

At length, Rosalie shrugged and, rising to her feet to signal adjournment, concluded: "Well, clearly we either had a determined intruder last night or still have a spy in our midst, and all we can do is to remain vigilant and make sure that any sensitive documents and files are kept locked away. This is something we'll have to deal with ourselves: the last thing Tenzing would want would be to have the local police around the place and to attract unwanted attention to our work here. It wouldn't take them very long to work out that something 'fishy' is going on here at *Foxholes*

Seth Longbottom, the groundsman, did assure them that he; Louis Barker, the caretaker and the young assistant, Brian, would take turns to patrol the grounds, which was mildly reassuring.

"Other than remain vigilant and try to stay safe, I really don't know what else to say or to advise," Rosalie Muller added. "I hope you don't think me dismissive or ineffective – far from it. But we have so little to go on."

"And in future," Matron added, casting her beady eyes in Conrad's direction, causing him to flinch involuntarily. "If something like this happens again, for heaven's sake don't keep it under your hat but inform members of staff immediately – even if it *is* the middle of the night."

Conrad exchanged glances with Dzoldzaya, but she merely smiled back. She wasn't the type to say "I told you so". Dzoldzaya was the type who didn't have to, being quite content to let him think this up for himself and gently stew in his own juices.

"By the way, how are the manuscripts coming on?" asked Rosalie as Conrad and Dzoldzaya got up to leave. As well as helping out with the work of the Network, she was of course part of Tenzing's publishing operation, a proof reader, copy editor and literary agent all rolled into one.

“Dzoldzaya finished before we left Narayana and Tenzing had begun to read the work before he was called away,” Conrad told her. “I was just checking up on a word before I was rudely interrupted, but it was only pedantry on my part: the book's pretty much ready.”

Rosalie smiled. “That's good. Well, how's about you let me read through your work, Conrad? And if Tenzing's not back by the time I've finished, I'll take a look at yours then, Dzoldzaya. Tenzing usually allows me the final say. Which is not intended as a boast, I hasten to add: it's merely a question of specialist function. 'Different horses for different courses,' as they say.”

Conrad headed toward the door.

“There's no rush, Conrad: whenever is convenient. And if I'm not in my office, just leave it on the desk.”

Conrad shook his head. “I'd rather you had it now, if you don't mind, Rosalie. I need to get it off my hands and let it go, or else I'll be forever running through the text and making minor changes.”

Rosalie laughed. “Yes, I know what you mean, Conrad.”

The woman exchanged glances with Dzoldzaya, then turned back to Conrad. “A little birdie tells me you've been chomping at the bit to have a go at writing some fiction ...”

“Chomping at the bit? Driving myself to distraction, more like. I have two characters sketched out in my head and it's quite bizarre, really. There must be a million and one possibilities for these characters, and yet my mind is completely blank and has been blank for the past couple of weeks. For the life of me, I can't think of a single storyline that appeals to me.”

“You mean you're spoilt for choice?”

“I wish I was. I'm not sure how to put it, really. I can think of a few possibilities for the characters, yet nothing springs to mind that really appeals to me. There seems to be some kind of mental block. I was hoping that maybe my subconscious might be clanking and whirring away in the background and that all of a sudden some wonderful idea might present itself to me in an 'Aha!' moment, but this hasn't happened. As I say, it's just a blank.”

Rosalie nodded thoughtfully. “Inspiration can be a wonderful thing, but it can also be quite fickle, Conrad. If you want to be

able to call on inspiration reliably then you need to work on it with regularity. Someone once said that if you only go out with a bucket to collect water when it's raining, sometimes you'll get water. But if you go out with your bucket every day, even when it's not raining, sometimes you'll catch unexpected rain. And also, a strange thing may happen: that the very act of going out with your bucket may actually provoke such rain."

"Mmm, that's a new one on me," he said. "And it sounds interesting, thanks."

"As for the infinite possibilities," Rosalie continued, "I've had similar experiences with that awful blank white page and 'a million and one possibilities', Conrad. Though it might seem strange to you, to the imagination, having a million and one possibilities is pretty much the same, and as useful, as having none at all.

"What I'd suggest is that you give your imagination something specific to work on and embroider. Yes, I mean actually reduce your options. I'd suggest that you simply start writing something, almost anything, involving your characters, to provide a basic context to which content may be added. It doesn't have to be deep and meaningful or stupendously exciting, just some ordinary, everyday activity that won't unduly sway the storyline or pre-determine where it heads and hem you in later on, but which simply offers potential openings, even if you don't know what those openings might be. It doesn't have to be the start of the book; what you write can be a scene from any point in the book and you may even choose to scrap or rewrite the scene at a later date. Writers sometimes become very attached to what they've already written, their 'baby' as it were, as if it's cast in concrete and can't be changed. I'm sure you're aware of this tendency. Though perfectly understandable, this is patent nonsense, of course."

Rosalie scratched her head. "Where was I? I've lost my thread."

"Imagination?" Dzoldzaya prompted.

"Oh, yes: imagination. Thank you, my dear. Imagination loves possibilities and angles, but it works better if there's a seed idea or if it's given something to chew over and relate to your memories and life experience. Simply trust your imagination to

come up with further and yet further possibilities as you proceed. Though there are any number of alternative formulations, there are three key elements to a work: context, content and process. Give the imagination some context and it will work on content and process will emerge of its own volition.”

Conrad thought about that and it seemed to make sense. “I can sense myself going round in a circle here, though, Rosalie. Doesn't that bring me back to having to come up with a context, and that's just where I'm stuck. Forgive me, I'm just thinking aloud here. It's just that it reminds me of not being able to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps.”

Rosalie laughed: “You remember the old adage: 'Fake it till you make it'?”

“Sure.”

“Well, just fake some content. Have your characters go visit a fairground or attend a funeral; have a heated argument or make wild, passionate love. Get the juices flowing. Pour some remembered or imagined emotion into the cup to stir the heart. There's another old saying, by the way, which may apply, too: 'Cry, and if you can't cry, try'. The details may vary, but that basic pattern can be quite efficacious.

“Whatever, just so long as you get a few hundred words down on the paper. And trust your imagination to come up with some context for it to work on. The imagination will help you out of the impasse and turn the closed circle into an open spiral.”

“Okay, will do,” Conrad smiled. He thanked Rosalie for her advice, begged leave, and headed back to his room to get the manuscript for her to look over before he had second thoughts and changed his mind..

Half way there, Conrad suddenly heard a rush of words heading his way like a steam train pulling several carriages, and he broke into a trot, anxious to grab his notebook and get the words down on paper before they passed him by and were lost.



## 6. Panning for gold

The four wayfarers had poacher's pie for dinner that evening, which was basically a thick stew made from rabbit and other game with a pie crust on top and the odd piece of buckshot thrown in for free, but they were famished after their travelling and it went down well enough.

Whether it was against the rules or not, after a couple of difficult mouthfuls of pie, both Helen and Miriam decided to dispense with the masks, though they prudently kept the masks close to hand, so that they could put them back on at a moment's notice.

"Tell me," asked Randal, striking up a conversation with Miriam. "you're clearly ill-at-ease with the inequalities you see around you. Are you a Collectivist? Or a Leveller?"

Miriam waited until she'd emptied her mouth.

"Heavens, no," she replied, shaking her head from side to side. "All the Collectivists would do is reduce everything to its lowest common denominator, and the Levellers' efforts are equally likely to bring about what you might call 'an all-levelling norm of mediocrity', which is little better, though at least the latter do not have a-theism and scientism in place of a heart."

"Then what do you stand for?"

"Well, if you're talking about politics, I would hope that what I stand for transcends such considerations and appeals to a broad section of the population. What makes us different in practise, rather than merely in theory, is that in my eyes, those in positions of authority and responsibility are not here to lord over us at the expense of the people, but rather here to represent and serve the people. And furthermore, they should not be granted this as their birth right but should be elected by the popular vote of the people. Not being particularly worldly-wise, I'm not sure what you'd call that, really."

So this was a homespun philosophy, Randal pondered, and he wondered whether Miriam was simply acting out of principle on the spur of the moment, or whether she'd really thought things through.

“A democracy, perhaps, such as they have in the Freelands?” ventured Tenzing. “Albeit that even there the regime is lacking in so many ways and that the term 'free' is something of a misnomer, even by mundane standards. Or a meritocracy, where folk are rewarded and rise in society based on their merit?”

“Yes, that's it in part,” Miriam nodded, taking a sip of her lemonade to wash down the food. “You might call me a Spiritual Democrat, I suppose. Are those the right words?”

Tenzing nodded as he finished off his meal, carefully lining up his knife and fork to one side of the plate.

“Do you think that such a democracy is possible?” Helen queried astutely. “Would a spiritual society not require the guidance of an enlightened Elect?”

Miriam had no ready answer for that and, though not vexed, you could see that this posed a difficulty to her.

“The words you had to say to the crowd that the preacher was addressing: what was that all about?” the director enquired, breaking the tense silence. “Tell me what you have in mind when you talk of spiritual dimensions.”

“It's not so much what I have in mind as what I feel in my heart, really.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Well, though I can see that those with experience can help guide us, I think that a hierarchy of clergy is an artificial and unnecessary imposition. I don't think that we need these intermediaries, though clearly we've grown used to them and come to depend upon their services.”

“So what do you see as an alternative, Miriam?”

“In general terms, I don't see the need for control, but would rather that we developed what should be an innate ability to self-regulate. Direct communion with and knowledge of Spirit, Reality, Truth – whatever you wish to call it.”

“Is that how you operate?”

“I would say that from an early age, I have been inspired, Tenzing.”

“Do you see visions or experience revelations?”

“Not waking visions, no. Words come to me and I feel the urge to echo those words.”

“And is this something that can be taught to others, or is it

the preserve of the few, Miriam?"

"I think it's a skill that we once had but have lost for one reason or another. As for being *taught*, perhaps it's more a matter of it being *caught*, from those who have the ability?"

Tenzing nodded in appreciation. "So, you are what might be termed 'a natural', rather than having yourself been trained?"

Miriam shrugged. "I suppose so. You must think me a bit of an oddball."

"Not at all, Miriam, not at all," Tenzing smiled, finishing off his lemonade. "Earlier you mentioned 'Our Lady'. Who is this?"

"Our Lady is the source of my inspiration. But not only that, I feel her all around – and by that I don't just mean 'all around me', I mean all around us and inside us. It's as if we are living and breathing and have emerged into her fertile womb."

"And how does she relate to God?" he asked.

"Well you know, Tenzing, we have so many gods. For many, gold is their god. Or lust. Even their ideologies. And often when I hear the theocrats talking about their god, he sometimes sounds altogether too anthropological. Is that the word I'm looking for?"

"Anthropomorphic?" Tenzing suggested.

"Yes, I think that's it. I feel that the god they are describing is not the same as 'the one and only God.' They call him a jealous god, but would such a wise and omniscient being have feelings of jealousy? If he is 'all and everything', then who has he to be jealous of?"

Miriam paused for a moment and anxiously scanned their faces, particularly Helen's, presumably in an attempt to gauge their reaction. "Does that make me a heretic?"

Tenzing smiled. "These are valid questions, Miriam. Though, yes, it has to be admitted that some would call you a radical, or a heretic."

She shrugged. "So be it. And, you know, they and the Hujardi go on at such great lengths about the way their god takes vengeance and cruelly smites unbelievers in his wrath. Surely that is the act of a benevolent despot or tyrant? This makes no sense to me, except it makes me wonder whether we are created in the image of God or god graven in our own defective image?"

Miriam drew in a deep breath. "Sometimes I wonder if the god many worship is nothing more than a pretender to the

throne.”

“A demiurge?” echoed Tenzing.

She nodded. “And that makes me an even greater heretic, doesn't it?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Indeed, Miriam. Though in saying this, please understand that I'm not judging you: holding such beliefs and expressing them publicly, especially in a place such as Gilgamar, is going to put your life in the utmost danger.”

“... as witnessed earlier,” she herself noted.

“As witnessed earlier,” he concurred. “And are there others like you here in Gilgamar? Is your work organized in any way?”

“I would imagine there must be others. But, no, I work alone. And yet I'm *not* alone, if you know what I mean? My mouth moves and out come the words as the spirit takes me – that's the full extent of my organization,” she laughed.

“So, given that you can't return to your own village and have lost all your possessions, and given that there are no others that you can turn to for help, have you any idea how you're going to proceed from here?”

Miriam shook her head sadly, and tears began to well up in here eyes as Tenzing's words impacted her.

Tenzing thought for a moment. “Miriam, you are not alone. I run a study centre called *Foxholes* near Sher Point, the capital city in the Freelands, and there are others passing through our doors just like you. We'll be here in the east for a few weeks and – if you're willing – then you're welcome to accompany us on our journeys. And at the end of that time, if you feel that you can get along with us, then I'm sure that I can arrange to get you safely across the border and out of here. We run courses at the centre which would not only help you settle into life in the Freelands, but also assist in further developing your undoubted talents. You are like gold dust.”

That was a rather polite way of saying, perhaps, that – just like him – Miriam still had an awful lot of work to do. Arriving at that realization, and in many ways starting all over again at square one, was half the battle. It was not easy to maintain the necessary “beginner's mind”, as Tenzing sometimes referred to it.

“And, conversely, if you decide that you'd rather not follow up on that possibility, then we'll do our best to sort something out

here, equally without obligation on your part. Anyhow, you don't have to arrive at a decision for a good few days, so I'd suggest that you simply relax and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, yes I'd like that, Tenzing," she smiled, wiping away the few remaining tears. "It's quite a relief knowing that there are others who understand and can maybe help me."

"It's my pleasure. That's what friends are for, Miriam," Tenzing smiled, patting her gently on the arm.

Miriam must have been quietly mulling over what Tenzing had said to her, for a few minutes later as they sat toasting their toes in front of the log fire in the lounge, she turned to Tenzing and asked: "You said I'm talented and that I'm like gold dust. Something tells me that there's more behind those words than immediately apparent. What did you mean by that?"

Tenzing raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Please don't take this the wrong way ...."

"No, of course not."

"You haven't heard what I have to say yet," he grinned.

"True."

"In the tradition which I represent – and yes, as good fortune would have it, it *is* a spiritual tradition – in that tradition, the talented are those who have undeniable ability yet still lack a certain understanding."

"I see, yes. And gold dust?"

"That is a precious, naturally-occurring and noble element. Its value is chiefly dictated by its relative rarity and by its potential. In order to fully profit from this raw material, since it so scattered, the gold dust has to be collected, often by a process known as panning, whereby it is separated through work (washing) from a great mass of other material. Rather than spell this out fully, suffice it to say that once separated from other largely base materials, the gold may be subjected to further work and transformed, so that it is further increased in beauty, utility and value, and also of course used as a medium of exchange.

"In common with some other noble elements, gold may be of further use as a catalyst, for example, which is something that assists in initiating, sustaining and accelerating reactions between other substances. So you can perhaps now see what I mean by potential and the many stages that the element must pass through

on the way to refinement and completion?”

“You know, you're quite a wise old bird, aren't you, Tenzing?” Miriam beamed on hearing this explanation.

Taking a sip of his tea, which the landlord had brought them when they'd finished their meal, Tenzing merely smiled. At length he added: “Having said that, it needs to be appreciated that the object of the work, though more readily practised in the presence of understanding, is not to understand but to *become*; to *Be*, and that involves the heart rather than the head. It's a very common pitfall to believe that one possesses a thing simply by virtue of understanding it (or for that matter through feelings engendered on encountering that thing). There is no substitute for actual first-hand experience, though of necessity in our teachings we often have to fall back on techniques that supply at best a taste of what might be experienced along the way, and inoculations against potential problems.”

“You say lack a *certain* understanding?” Miriam continued after a time. “It occurs to me that maybe you used that word advisedly?”

“Certainty is one of those skills which, as you so rightly put it, has largely become lost to us over time,” Tenzing agreed. “In spiritual schools, the novices often look to their teacher thinking that only one so advanced can have achieved such certainty. By the way, it's actually nothing to do with being advanced, except to the extent that one has carried out the preliminary work of sorting out the rampant ego, but rather of being available and receptive; ready, willing and able as they say. Yes, we have been instructed that it is the Teacher and the teacher alone who knows things with certainty and can thus act in a conscious way while everyone else is to some degree ignorant, heedless, vain, deluded; and so on and so forth. If you're working in a teaching situation, and wish to establish order and the right kind of working environment, and facilitate learning, then that's the kind of thing you'd say; and it makes sense.

“However, as I see it (and immediately the question pops up 'who am I to say such things?'), this certainty isn't a switch that's suddenly clicked on when one receives initiation or when one receives one's remit to teach (an all or nothing kind of thing); it's something that begins when one starts to question oneself (the

self-accusing self) and it's something that begins to come to fruition – at first sporadically, in fits and bursts of intuition, insight and inspiration and with imprecision – when the inspired self begins to kick in. This is something that needs to be practised and to be handled delicately, however, because the ego still delights in such abilities and sooner or later as you're practising, someone's going to turn round and draw your attention to your sense of self-importance ('who are you to say such things?'), picking up on that rather than appreciating that this is something that simply needs to be practised. Not a very polished performance, they might inform you, not appreciating that you're 'just jamming' to use the musicians' parlance, knowing that you are just jamming.

“Regarding the transmission of experience, at a subtle level and with the aid of grace, it is possible to communicate heart to heart, and this *is* something that the teacher is likely to be proficient at. But even at apparently more ordinary levels, such as listening to someone speak or reading a book, it's possible to communicate something of the orator or writer's mind set and of the way he or she goes about things.

“When I first began to learn to play the guitar (admittedly not very well), I adopted three approaches: the first was to get hold of a book and learn and practise my basic chord finger positions and changes; the second was to use sheet music to practise songs with which I was already familiar (and could listen to recordings of); the third was to simply hang out with the lads and listen to and watch them jamming. You'll be surprised at what can be picked up through association and through observational learning.

“So what's the role of the teacher, you may ask ....”

“Yes, I was just about to,” Miriam laughed out loud.

“It is this. I don't so much see a so-called teacher or guide as a teacher of 'know what', but rather as a facilitator of learning 'know how'.”

“Know how?”

“I would say that 'know how' means skills that are transferable to other situations. They leave a kind of fossil imprint or template on the psyche; not the real thing, of course, but sufficient to enable us to recognize the real thing when something of the same shape or texture or quality again clicks into place in

that space. Off the top of my head, we might say that two of the skills that a doctor learns are the ability to listen and to discern. And these skills may be effectively put to use in a great many other situations one encounters in life outside the surgery.

“And what I'm doing here and now, Miriam, in making these connections is modelling; showing you how you, in turn, may make similar connections. And how you, in turn, may model for those who follow after you.”

“Ah, I see!”

“To go back to the gold. It probably won't have escaped your hawk-like attention, that there are other and more productive means of acquiring and accumulating gold. Mining is one such method, though it requires a good deal of real effort in order to dig into the mountain of accretions that surround the treasure.

“Fortunately, and in addition to this in the spiritual sphere, we could say that not only do we dig our way in, but there is something quite magical and intelligent that helps us by digging its way out, to meet us halfway. But more of that on another day.”

“Does the work involve suffering?” asked Miriam quite perceptively.

“Firstly, yes, let me say that the work requires real effort and you might say that the eventual refinement of the noble element is a baptism in fire.

“Now, what about suffering? Well, all life in this abode of decay is subjected to pain from time to time. There's not a lot we can do about that, alas, except try to alleviate the pain and avoid unnecessary pain where possible. But suffering? By and large, though you may find this hard to credit, suffering is a mental and emotional construct rather than something real, so we could say that though pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. Despite what religionists may tell you to the contrary, there's no merit to be had in sanctifying or glorifying one's own suffering, nor in causing others to suffer, nor will it get you fast tracked to paradise.”

“Do you believe in an afterlife?” she asked, and added: “In your conversation with Helen a while back, I noticed you repeatedly used the phrase 'passed away' rather than 'died.'”

“Okay, Miriam, let's start with 'belief': I know it's a bit of a hobby horse of mine, but it's worth repeating: belief is a poor substitute for true knowledge, as I'm sure you're aware. I'd even



go so far as to enquire: 'Do you believe in life before death?'

"Mull that over. At first the nuances of these matters tend to pass us by or else only occur to us later, after an often quite lengthy delay; though with experience, one will come to more and more immediate apprehension."

Tenzing paused for a few moments to allow his words to sink in, before continuing. "No, seriously, as for the afterlife which was the next part of your question, let me simply say that many of the things we see in this world are merely shadowy local concretizations of something real to be found in what we term, not unnaturally, the Real World. In our tradition, this is not something to be attained at the end of one's life as a reward for living a good life (let alone for causing the suffering of unbelievers), but something to be accessed or achieved before physical death."

"But how, if this is but a shadow world and we, presumably, mere shadow players?"

"Ah, perhaps you mean: 'How can a person pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, especially if up to their necks in mud?' Well, fortunately for us, as they say: 'the apparent is a bridge to the real.' So, for example, worldly love may serve as a gateway to Real Love. Up to a point, our own efforts will allow us to make headway. Beyond a certain point, given good will and heart, grace will come to meet us half way. So we're not totally up shit creek without a paddle, if you'll excuse the vernacular.

"And finally," said Tenzing, "you mention my use of the word 'passed away.'"

"Yes."

"As well as run a study centre, as I said I also represent a spiritual path, and as part of that operation, I am in the business of publishing books, to ensure that the materials are made available in lasting written form and to make the learning more widely available.

"There was one reader, a professional encyclopaedist who had a real bee in his bonnet and would complain vociferously every time I used the phrase 'passed away' in my articles and books when referring to past masters. He was also a book critic of some renown and he went so far as to extend this pre-occupation of his into his reviews of my works.

“So I told him: although encyclopaedically correct, I actually think 'passed away' is more fitting in materials which represent and concern themselves with a spiritual path, than 'died', where repeated challenges of this kind may be rightly or wrongly construed as pursuing an a-theist agenda.

“‘Passed away’ is the more inclusive, since it would satisfy atheists or agnostics reading it as a euphemism for the word 'died', yet leave open other possibilities, such as life after death, for those so inclined. It does this without riding roughshod over those with spiritual or religious sensitivities or close to the subjects in question. As I said to this fellow, not that he was listening to what I had to say: 'If you can present evidence to the contrary – that one does not pass away to some other realm upon physical death – please do so.'

“Certainly if one were to follow the *letter* of the law, then that would favour use of the word 'died'. But there is also the *spirit* of the law – or equity – to consider. Now all this might sound absurd to you, but in our line of work we frequently come up against those who religiously adhere to the letter of the law and it can be a major stumbling block. To which I might add, though perhaps this goes without saying, that unbelief can become every bit as much of a dogmatic religion or even an obsession as belief itself.”

“Do you dream of 'Our Lady'?” Helen asked Miriam. “I quite often dream of Tenzing.”

“Every now and again,” she replied. “Sometimes what she has to say is as clear as day, though I have to admit that on most occasions I'm left quite baffled.”

Tenzing nodded. “I remember my sister dreaming of my own Master one night and, remembering the dream when she awoke, she related it to me. There was one particular phrase that she uttered that momentarily left me mouth agape: 'More than connected, we are one', the reason being that, though my sister had no obvious way of knowing it, these words were a phrase which my Master would use from time to time and were unique to him.”

A thought suddenly struck Randal. “You know, I sometimes think that there's some sort of a spiritual contract between us and those close to us, offering to assist others, in miniature. I've

actually experienced something that may be along those lines. It was a couple I knew in which one was indeed helping the other along, and yet that help didn't seem to be so much a conscious decision as something operating at a more subtle or elevated level, and which suddenly sprang into my awareness. On the face of it, the woman in the relationship should have turned and walked away from her hopeless and abusive husband; and yet she didn't: she stayed in the relationship to help pull him from the mire; as if, in spite of appearances, this were some secret mission of mercy that she had to accomplish in her life as part of her own work."

Tenzing added to this: "We may seldom notice it, Randal, but those actions at a 'subtle and elevated level' as you rightly call them, are going on all the time, though our senses are often fixed on the grosser dimensions. But there's another element – a part of us and also a part of what is around us, something that goes beyond what we are accustomed to labelling 'our self' – that does indeed pick up on these higher necessities and, if we can to some extent quieten or stand outside our thoughts and feelings and listen carefully, we can hear it prompting us to act in accordance with that need. The Heart's Noble Imperative, you might call it.

"Anyway, it's getting late," Tenzing concluded, glancing at his pocket watch and slowly rising to his feet. "So with that I'll bid you all sweet dreams and turn in for the night."

It had been quite a heady evening with all that talk of mysticism and Helen tried to drag Randal out of his armchair. "Let's go for a quick walk, lover. I need to clear my head."

Randal was quite happy where he was, beginning to doze off in front of the fire. Helen playfully tickled his ribs until he was squirming and begging for mercy. "Okay, okay," he cried out, jumping up out of the chair.

Pulling him to one side out of sight of Miriam, she gently ran her hand up the inside of his thigh. "If we can find somewhere out of the way, I'll make it worth your while," she whispered.

Randal raised his eyebrows. With the two men in one room and the two ladies in another, it had been some time since he and Helen had shared some private time together, and he had to admit that he frequently felt the urge.

"Let's go then," he whispered back, then turned to Miriam

and made an attempt at telling her they needed some private time together and that they'd see her later.

"I'm sorry, I rather botched that, didn't I? It sounds so rude and inhospitable," he apologized.

"No offence taken, Randal," the lady smiled, rising from her chair. "I need to turn in, anyway, and I quite understand. Now off you go, young love birds, and enjoy yourselves."

Miriam knew of course, Randal could see that by the smile and the twinkle in her eye.

They got as far as the pavement outside the front door, just as a pickup truck was heading their way. The Hujardi were out patrolling the area.

Randal snatched at Helen's hand, pulled her back inside and quietly closed the door behind them. "Ah, on second thoughts, maybe that wasn't such a good idea," he sighed, and they went back upstairs.

Helen, however, was not to be outdone. As they walked along the corridor back to the bedroom, she spied a door with the word "Private" chiselled out on a wooden plaque and tried the door handle. The door was unlocked and she opened it and had a look inside. It was a small storeroom with shelves to hold spare bedclothes and towels and assorted cleaning equipment and supplies.

She tugged Randal inside, slipped off her shoes and gently pushed the door closed behind them. It was pitch black in there, so Randal reached out and turned on the tiny light.

Helen carefully moved a mop and bucket out of the way, but it was quite clear that there was no room for them on the floor and, in any case, the bare floorboards would have been all too uncomfortable and confined to lay down on, but somehow she'd find a way.

Helen unbuckled Randal's heavy leather belt, unzipped his jeans and, without ceremony, tugged them down to his knees. Then she turned around so that he could unfasten the clasp at the back of her dress, let the dress fall around her ankles and stepped out of it. She stood there for a moment, naked, wearing only her frilly suspender belt and black seamed stockings. Then Randal took her up in his arms, with his hands under her thighs and her feet clasped behind his back and carefully stepped across the store

room to gently push her up against the wall. Reaching down between her legs, she took hold of him and guided him inside her and they made love.

When Randal was done, he gently lowered Helen to the ground and they stood there for a time, kissing long and passionately.

Randal pulled away reluctantly and began to fasten himself up, but Helen wasn't finished with him quite yet. When she'd again managed to arouse his interest, she turned away from him, bent forward with her hands on one of the wooden shelves in front of her and feet apart and waggled her curvaceous derrière seductively in his direction. He didn't require much further encouragement and they made love a second time.

They stood there hugging, their bodies glistening with beads of sweat, until the feelings of heart-pumping excitement gradually subsided. Then they got dressed once more and, furtively looking around, they quietly slipped out of the store room and, hand-in-hand, they headed for bed.

## 7. The list

It was gone ten o'clock that night when Carstairs eventually arrived back at his apartment. Folkstone and Hilder had been watching him since first thing that morning and followed him into the city, but they got stuck in the rush hour traffic and he'd eluded them.

Hilder was in the front passenger seat, mouth agape and snoring away and Folkstone dug his partner in the ribs to wake him up.

"Wha's up?" the man spluttered, eyes darting around and reaching inside his jacket for his gun.

"Carstairs is home," replied Folkstone, nodding in the direction of the old Orion parked further up the road outside the apartment.

Hilder pulled himself together. "So what's the plan, Mister Folkstone?"

"I will enquire forthwith, with He Who Shall Be Obeyed, Mister Hilder."

Folkstone tapped a number into the car phone and waited impatiently for a reply. He left the phone ringing and ringing until finally there was a reply.

"Yeah? Who is it? This had better be important," came the curt and cracking reply at the other end of the line. It was Halliwell.

"It's Folkstone, cutie pie. Just to let you know Carstairs has turned up again at his apartment. Hilder and I are awaiting your further instructions ...."

"Don't you 'cutie pie' me, Folkstone."

The voice at the other end went quiet for a few seconds, then came back to them. "Terminate the target and get back to me during office hours tomorrow," requested the voice on the other end, then Halliwell abruptly hung up.

"You or me, brother?" asked Hilder.

"Oh, I think a duet would be in order, don't you? The dog collars, perhaps?"

"An excellent idea, Brother Folkstone." Hilder reached over

to the back seat of the car, heaved his kit bag onto his lap and ferreted around inside.

He passed some of the gear over to his partner and Folkstone clipped on the fake black shirt front and dog collar and inserted the obligatory goofy teeth. Folkstone stepped out of the car and, clutching the Good Book tightly to his chest, they walked slowly and reverently down the street toward the apartment block.

They went in through the front door and stood in the hallway. "Which number, Brother Hilder?"

Hilder consulted the list. "Number 435 on the third floor floor, Brother Folkstone."

Faced with so many flights of stairs and not in the peak of fitness, Folkstone summoned the lift and waited as it slowly began to descend from the top floor.

The doors opened and two elderly women stepped out. "Good evening, ladies. I represent the High Church of the Holey Communion ...."

Making no reply, the women quickened their pace and made a beeline for the front doors. Folkstone dashed ahead of them and stood holding the door open for them, giving them a saintly smile through his goofy dentures. "Perhaps I might interest you in the Good Book? We have a special offer on this week. Everlasting life in the kingdom of heaven, on easy and affordable terms, with a no quibble, money back guarantee ...."

"Not today, thank you, your reverence," one of them retorted rather brusquely and they left, tittering away to one-another.

"Two for the price of one, perhaps ...."

Too late, the women were gone.

"Oh well, suit yourselves. But when your time comes, don't say that I didn't offer you redemption." In a huff he slammed the door shut behind the women and headed back to the lift.

"Third floor, Brother Hilder."

Hilder selected the button. The doors slid to behind them and they began to ascend. As they reached the third floor, the doors opened and they stepped out onto a wide, burgundy-carpeted corridor. Hilder made a mental note of the numbers on the nearby doors and indicated to his left. "This way, Brother."

When they reached number 435, they stopped outside the door. Folkstone took out a comb and carefully brushed the few

remaining long strands of hair from one side of his head and across his bald head to the other.

There was a spy hole in the door at about eye level and Hilder spat out his chewing gum and stuck it firmly to the lens. Then he rang the door bell and they waited, clutching the Good Book tightly to their chests.

There was no reply, so Hilder rang again, a little more insistently this time, and again they waited.

There were footsteps inside, coming toward the door now and a voice called out: "Yes, who is it?"

"Might we have a quick word, Mister, er, um, Mister Carstairs?"

"What about?"

"It's a matter of some importance," Folkstone called back, "and I'd prefer it if we could discuss it in private."

"Oh, very well."

There was a jangling of keys and the door opened wide. Carstairs stood before them in his dressing gown and pyjamas. When he saw the dog collars, he groaned aloud and began to close the door in their faces, but Hilder was too quick for him and stepped over the threshold.

"Mister Carstairs?"

"Yes?"

"Mister Jerome Carstairs?"

"Yes? Look, can't you see I'm heading for bed. Simply state your business and bugger off."

"We have an important message for you." Folkstone indicated the Good Book he was carrying and began to flick idly through the pages.

"I'm not interested. I'm a confirmed atheist."

Folkstone gave him an exaggerated wink. "No, no, sir, you misunderstand. We have an important message for you." Again he winked and raised his bushy eyebrows, nodding his head to one side to emphasize his point.

It suddenly dawned on Carstairs and he tapped his nose. "Oh, you mean important Network business."

Then, quite out of the blue, the man added. "And if that is so, you'll be able to tell me today's password ...."

Folkstone flipped through the pages of the Good Book and



looked up. Reaching inside the hollowed out pages he retrieved a snub nosed air pistol. Carstairs took an involuntary step backward, momentarily caught off balance. But before he could either turn and run or charge at them, Folkstone squeezed the trigger and a tiny silver dart drilled the man's forehead. There was hardly more than a click and a hiss from the weapon, and too little force behind the tiny dart, and the man just stood there, with a shocked expression on his face.

“Three, two, one ...” Carstairs' legs buckled beneath him and he landed in a crumpled heap on the floor. “Da-dah.”

Folkstone returned the gun to the Good Book, closed the door behind him and walked with Hilder back down the corridor. The lift was still on their floor and they stepped inside, descended to the ground floor and left the building, just as the two old women were returning.

“Good evening again, ladies,” Folkstone smiled, as he and Hilder turned to head down the road toward the car, making a special point of showing his goofy teeth and combing the few strands of hair across his bald head. You could bet your last shilling that if the two old biddies were questioned by the police and asked for a description, that's all they'd remember, he mused as he climbed back in the driver's seat and pulled off the ridiculous skull cap. People were so unobservant and gullible.

“Home, Mister Hilder?”

“Home, Mister Folkstone. And I think a glass of champers and a long soak in a nice, relaxing bubble bath would be in order, don't you, my little cherubim?” He playfully tickled his accomplice under the chin.

“Oh, rather.”

## 8. Om Dor

After a hearty breakfast, the wayfarers sat out again that day, heading out of the countryside toward Om Dor. The city stood at the junction of two great rivers fed by the melting ice and snow of the distant mountain ranges, and combined these two rivers formed the almighty Kumran which flowed across the expansive lowlands and eventually into the ocean far to the south.

At the heart of Om Dor, atop a hill, stood the glittering golden domes and spires and the crenelated walls of one of the forbidden temples, a city in its own right, and around this, outside its walls, an outer secular city had grown up over the centuries; at first to service and supply the inner sanctum but now more and more with an appetite and needs of its own.

As they neared the city, Helen and Miriam once again reluctantly donned those emotionally-vacuous white masks. And again, as they entered the city, they were stopped by the Hujardi and they and their vehicle were searched, though fortunately these self-appointed religious police found nothing untoward and allowed them to pass.

The Hujardi were in far greater numbers here, some heavily armed and patrolling the streets in their battered old pickup trucks while others occupied most of the seats on the pavements outside many of the tea-houses, shooting the breeze with their comrades-in-arms.

“Have you been here before, Miriam?” asked Tenzing as he slowly negotiated his way through the crowds, looking for a place where they might park and get out to explore the city on foot.

“Once, when I was about eight years old, before my mother and father died,” she replied. “I came with with my father. The whole village and outlying farms saved up each year to send two of us on pilgrimage to Om Dor. And that was our turn.”

“This is new to us, Miriam, so be our eyes and ears,” Tenzing suggested.

Tenzing finally found a parking space out of the way of the crowds and they got out to stretch their legs. They wandered through the streets to see what wares were on offer in the many

road side market stalls.

“But this is not how I remember it,” Miriam observed. “Om Dor was always famed for its brightly coloured and richly patterned fabrics. These things were greatly prized. For the women, all I see in the roadside stalls are plain clothes in simple, pastel shades, and a sea of tear-drops. I see so many forlorn white faces. Yet the men, who were always so conservatively dressed in traditional attire, are now far more cosmopolitan in appearance.”

“What else has changed?” Tenzing asked.

Miriam cast her eyes around. “At one time, the city was bursting at the seams with stalls selling religious relics and ritual paraphernalia. I remember nagging my father to come with me and see what appeared to me to be wonders, but he would not. He said that the things they were selling were just cheap imitations and that the prices they demanded were extortionate. Look around you: not a single one of these stalls remains.”

Miriam caught the attention of one of the nearby stall holders. “Tell me, where are the bright fabrics and the relics you used to have here?”

The stall holder ignored her and addressed his reply instead to Tenzing. “All forbidden. No can sell. But I have plenty fine wares. Here, come look see.”

Thanking the man, Tenzing declined his invitation and they went on their way, spending a few minutes chatting over a drink and a sandwich outside a tea-house before heading off to see what they could see of the temple-city.

Ahead of them were a group of Hujardi and Tenzing spent some time negotiating with them. For some reason, they were reluctant to let them pass. Finally Tenzing won them round, though the group insisted on searching them thoroughly, even confiscating the four oranges that they'd just bought at one of the stalls without offering any rational explanation. Most likely, if the Hujardi wanted something, they'd just take it, and that was that.

To get nearer to the walls of the city, the four of them had to cross two precarious swaying rope bridges spanning the river, which met in the middle on a rocky outcrop. Then once over the other side, they followed a gravel path which zigzagged up the hill, until they came to a level stretch of grass which ran alongside the tall granite walls.

As they strolled around the walls, they could see groups of Hujardi dotted here and there and above them, on the battlements, was a sprinkling of gaily-dressed soldiers who were there, presumably, to guard the city. They eyed one-another grimly and occasionally the Hujardi hurled foul-mouthed insults their way.

For a few moments Randal was left wondering what on earth there was at the walls of the temple-city to arouse the Hujardi's interest, and then it dawned on him. Since they seemed to lack the necessary means to storm the city they were simply sitting it out and, deprived of supplies from outside, eventually those inside would have to lay down their arms and surrender, take their own lives, or starve to death.

Approaching an old, gnarled tree that stood outside the walls of the forbidden city, Helen drew her breath in suddenly and stopped dead in her tracks; then abruptly turned away, pulling off her white mask and clutching her hand to her mouth, as if on the point of vomiting. Hanging from the tree, with a stout rope around his ankles and his saffron robes stained brown with blood, like some butchered animal, was the corpse of one of the monks. With his hands and even his genitalia cruelly hacked off, the man's body was on display for all to see, no doubt to strike terror into the hearts of his fellow monks and anyone else who had the misfortune to pass this way.

"Not a word," Tenzing advised, clapping his hand across Helen's mouth as she opened it to call out in condemnation of this atrocity. Shielding her from the view, Tenzing took Helen's arm and rapidly moved her on, giving the tree a wide berth.

Continuing on round the city walls, still feeling quite shaken and their emotions heavy in their stomachs, they came to a wide expanse of grass. Not far ahead, a number of the Hujardi were toiling. It looked like they were working on some kind of siege engine, like a catapult, built from roughly sawn logs. Tenzing would have gone further, to see what was going on, but one of the Hujardi came marching across to bar their way. Not far from the catapult was what looked like a pile of decaying carcasses.

"What are you doing?" asked Tenzing.

"God willing, we are sending the idolaters a gift to persuade them to abandon their accursed city," the man smirked.

"And what are those?"

“You'd be well advised not to stand down wind of those,” the man advised. “Those are the rotting carcasses of diseased sheep.”

“What disease?”

“The plague, or so I'm told. And soon, God willing, the idolaters' city will be full of their own rotting, diseased carcasses.”

“But what if the plague spreads?” Tenzing wanted to know. “It could decimate the population.”

“God protects all true believers,” the man replied nonchalantly.

Tenzing spun on his heel and ushered them away. “The sooner we are out of here, the better,” he urged.

They required no further prompting.

## 9. Incommunicado

Conrad was on his way toward the library when Rosalie Muller called to him from just outside Matron's office. He turned back and went to see what she wanted.

"Hi Conrad. I was hoping to catch you. A couple of things: I've read right through your manuscript."

He sucked in his breath. "Any good?"

"Absolutely. I've made a number of proof reading corrections and some copy editing. Very minor things, you understand, and nothing out of the ordinary."

"Does that mean I'll have to copy the text out again?" he asked.

"No, not at all. Just ignore the red ink. The work will have to be typed up and saved to disk before it can go to the printer."

"Ah ... Did I mention that I can only type with two fingers?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that; either I or one of the office staff can do that for you."

"Phew, I'm glad about that. Shows how little I know about the craft."

"And ..."

"And?" He pulled a face suggesting trepidation.

"I've also made suggestions about a couple of changes you might make. If you'd like to sort out those changes yourself, that's fine; or else Tenzing or I could make changes. Again, Conrad, this is not unusual and certainly nothing at all to worry about. It's not to sort out defects, but rather to enhance the work, you understand. Anyhow, you can have the manuscript back whenever is convenient for you. Have a look and see what you think."

"Thank you. So what did you think of it, overall?"

"I found it a thoroughly enjoyable read, Conrad."

"And do you think Tenzing would be willing to publish?"

She nodded. "I can almost guarantee it. I'm sure the stories would dovetail wonderfully with the rest of the catalogue. And although I can't speak for Tenzing, it occurs to me that he could bring some extra value to the work by adding short commentaries

to the stories. It strikes me that a number of them have deep meanings that might not be apparent to the casual reader.”

Conrad breathed a sigh of relief. Then: “You mentioned that there were two things you wanted to see me about?”

“Yes, I gather you and Dzoldzaya are planning to go into the city later this morning. I wonder if you could do me a small favour?”

“Sure, Rosalie, just name it,” he nodded without hesitation.

“I need to get a message to one of the Network's operatives. I've been trying to phone him for three days now and there's no answer. I wondered if perhaps you might call by and let him know I need to get in touch or – failing that – drop a note through his letterbox?”

“Will do.”

Dipping into her shoulder bag, she produced a small manilla envelope.

“Sherringham Street?”

“Just off Gondar Gardens, down near the river.”

“Ah, yes. That's not far from where Dzoldzaya and I are heading. Consider it done.”

“Oh, thank you so much, you are a dear,” she smiled, patting him gently on the shoulder. “Anyhow, enjoy your day out. I'll see you later. Now, must dash as I'm covering some of Tenzing's sessions whilst he's away.” And with that, Rosalie went skipping off down the corridor in the direction of the hall.

Later, as Randal read through Rosalie Muller's notes and idly flicked through the pages of the manuscript, and seeing how much red ink Rosalie had used, he realized that she had been diplomatic about the changes she'd had to make. To say that Rosalie had been thorough would have been an understatement: Some of the pages were awash with blood, as if some fierce battle had been waged. But at least she'd seen sufficient merit in the work to warrant publication.

## 10. The secret

Once they got back to the city streets, the four travellers spent some time shopping. They were in need of supplies for the next stage of the journey and Miriam, especially, was in need of clothing, having escaped with only the clothes she was wearing. That was more the ladies' department than his or Tenzing's, so they tagged along and maintained a discreet distance, though they were called upon from time to time with whispered calls of "You don't think my bum looks too big in this, do you?" and to offer their gentlemanly reactions, until one of the male sales assistants came across and suggested to them that this attention was unbecoming and ill-advised. After that they had to resort to covert hand signals; the thumbs up, thumbs down, raising of eyebrows, and wavering of the hand to suggest they weren't quite sure.

That chore out of the way, they returned to the car to stow their goods, then drove on some distance, the crowds on the streets now beginning to thin out, until they came to a hostelry where they could eat and stay the night. Randal was gasping for a cigarette and a cup of coffee, but there was none to be had in Om Dor, and this abrupt, enforced cessation was playing havoc with his blood pressure and his nerves and even his ability to think straight.

Seeing this, Miriam had suggested a traditional remedy and after hunting around the street stalls for a time, she eventually found him some liquorice. He'd expected it to be confectionery, moulded into the shape of sticks or buttons, but no – he not realizing that they actually *grew* the stuff – this was the real thing: coarse-textured twigs of liquorice for him to suck on and chew to his heart's content.

After a time, their stomachs beginning to rumble, they found a table by the window looking out onto the street, with the golden domes in the distance, and the landlady came across to serve them and waited patiently as they made their selections.

Tenzing looked up from his menu and for some reason he seemed momentarily distracted, then he turned back to the menu



and gave the lady his order as she scribbled it down on a pad of paper.

“That's a delightful brooch, if I might say so,” he remarked, nodding toward the lady. It was an intricately worked piece of silver in the form of a bunch of grapes. “I haven't seen such fine work in years and feared that the secret had died out.”

The lady smiled as she completed the order and half turned to leave. “Oh, no, my friend, the secret is safe with me.”

Shortly after, she returned to their table with a tray in her hand, to bring them their tea. She addressed Tenzing. “If you'd prefer, there is a table in the back overlooking the garden. I think you'd be more at home there.”

“Certainly,” Tenzing replied, rising to his feet. He followed her through the building to a small room at the back, overlooking a delightful walled garden, and out onto a raised veranda.

“You won't be disturbed here,” she said, addressing Helen and Miriam. “So if you'd rather dispense with those accursed masks, nobody will be any the wiser.”

Then she left, closing the stout door behind her.

After they'd eaten and their plates cleared away, a man came out onto the veranda, introducing himself as Helmech, the landlord. He was followed out by a group of three young men.

“Please don't worry,” he said, addressing Tenzing and sitting down at the table opposite. “Like my better half, Rohanna, and me, they are friends.”

The man fished in the pocket of his apron and pulled out a packet of ready-rolled cigarettes, offering them around. “Please, feel free.”

Despite his trepidation, Randal didn't need to be asked twice. He accepted a light and took a deep breath. Within a moment, he felt dizzy and it felt as if his body had turned to lead and his legs to wobbly rubber, having been without his tobacco for so long. Gradually the feeling subsided and he took a second drag which was more satisfying than the first. Helen merely shook her head in resignation.

Shortly afterwards, the landlady, Rohanna, came out into the garden with what looked like her young son, bearing trays. She came to serve the new guests whilst her son went to serve the young men.

As he took his first sip of the golden nectar, Randal recognized it instantly. It was a drink that Tenzing kept in reserve for special occasions.

“*Chungari*”, Tenzing nodded appreciatively as he sniffed the bouquet of his own drink. “Indeed we are amongst friends here.”

“Again, don't worry about the Hujardi. I've locked the front door and put up the 'closed' sign,” Rohanna reassured them. “And as you can see, unless they'd been told about it, nobody would even know that this hidden garden was here.”

“Where are you from? Not from Gilgamar, that's for certain,” the woman asked when they'd been formally introduced.

“From Sher Point, in the Freelands,” Tenzing told them, and went on to mention the study centre and the purpose of the Network which he ran.

Rohanna looked at her husband, Helmech, and he looked at her. They seemed to come to a decision in that exchange and Rohanna called her son over. “Go and get another bottle of *chungari*, Leith, and top up the glasses.”

“May I tell you a story, Tenzing?” she finally asked as Helmech again passed around his cigarettes.

“Certainly.”

“It concerns the Work. As you may have seen already, the Hujardi have the temple-city under siege.”

Tenzing nodded. “Yes, so I'd noticed.”

“We have a loved one in the temple-city. His name is Kochees and he is our youngest son. At the age of three, searching for the incarnation of one of their number and following certain signs, the High Lamas came to our door. They presented Kochees with several objects and asked him to choose between them. Without fail, he chose the particular objects that had indeed once belonged to the High Lama who had passed over shortly before Kochees was born.”

“They took us into the temple-city where they conducted further tests, and again Kochees passed those tests. So they gave Helmech and me a quantity of gold, sufficient for us to purchase this inn, and they took Kochees into training. He's been in the temple-city ever since.”

“I see, I see. So how old is he now?” Tenzing asked.

“Next week he will be nine. But don't be fooled by his age.

Even as a toddler he had something about him, and I'm told that he is very wise for his few years. They say he is destined to enter the inner ranks of the High Lamas."

"You're told'? Do you have access to Kochees?"

"The Lamas don't allow us access to the temple-city, though before the Hujardi arrived he was occasionally allowed to visit under the escort of one of the High Lamas. And we have a friend of a friend who does work for the High Lamas and is granted access to the city. So whenever he can, he brings us word of how Kochees is getting on."

"While I remember," said Tenzing. "When my companions and I went across the bridge to look around the walls of the temple-city, we saw the Hujardi working on a catapult. Their aim is to propel the plague-diseased carcasses of animals over the walls. The Lamas must be warned not to touch the rotting carcasses but instead to burn them immediately. And it's vitally important that they maintain their personal cleanliness."

Tenzing dug out his notebook and pen and scribbled something down. "Here is a traditional recipe that my dear grandmother passed on to me. It contains cinnamon, cloves, eucalyptus, lemon and rosemary in equal measures and is to be applied to the hands, feet and face. This will not cure the plague, but it will help ward it off and reduce the chances of it spreading." He handed the note to Rohanna who examined it carefully.

"How do you know that this will work?" she wanted to know.

"There's an old legend about that which has been passed down in the tradition I represent," he told her. "Centuries ago, plague swept through the lands, killing thousand upon thousand. I don't know how many lived in those days, but it is said that the plague killed over half of the population. Anyhow, one day a group of thieves who'd been stealing from the corpses of plague victims came before a judge. He offered to pardon them providing they revealed the secret that enabled them to wander amongst the victims and plunder their bodies without themselves succumbing to the disease. They explained that they were spice merchants and herbalists by trade, and what I just gave you is the concoction they used."

“But how does the plague spread?” asked Miriam.

“Despite what you may hear to the contrary from ignorant religious fanatics who tell you it is the work of demons, or God smiting the wicked, the plague may be spread by contact with or proximity to diseased hosts. For example through physical touching, unguarded coughs and sneezes, or a kiss. Even something as simple as not washing one's hands after answering the call of nature and then handling food. And it's also spread by rats through a bite, the rat's urine and faeces, and parasites such as fleas that may jump from host to host.”

Helmech and Rohanna were deeply shocked by this news and sensed the urgency of the matter. When she'd recovered her composure, Rohanna called her son, Leith, over. She relayed Tenzing's message to him and sent him off to find a friend of a friend who might – eventually – get word to the temple-city. She told Tenzing that the grapevine was sometimes rather convoluted.

At this point, the young men got up to leave and exchanged kind words and blessings on parting. Rohanna seemed to hesitate at this point, uncertain of how to continue.

Tenzing smiled. “Would you like me to simply say 'yes' and then allow you to pose the question that is on the tip of your tongue, Rohanna? Would that make it easier for you?”

“Am I making it that obvious?” the lady asked, blushing a little and casting her eyes down momentarily. Finally she said: “I'm putting you in an awkward position here, and I shouldn't, for you are my guest.”

Tenzing merely intensified his smile. “Apart from the fact that I delight in being of service at a personal level, Rohanna, when it comes to the Work, that has precedence. So, I say again: the answer is a resounding 'yes'. Now, what is the question?”

Rohanna took a deep breath. “The far side of the temple-city is rocky and backs onto the river. This makes it inaccessible to, and out of sight to, the Hujardi.”

Tenzing nodded to show that he was following what Rohanna was saying.

“Later tonight, when the stars emerge, those young men you saw will take a rowing boat to the shoreline. Kochees will be waiting there for them. And, if all goes well, they will bring him back here.”

“And?”

“I'm not sure what comes after 'and', Tenzing. All I know is that we were to hide him and hopefully find some way of getting him out of Gilgamar. Much as we would love to have Kochees here with us, it wouldn't be safe for him to stay.”

“Why not?”

“I fear that he would be recognized and that someone would inform the Hujardi. It would only take a quiet word in their ear and we'd all be done for, and they have so many spies around these days.”

“I see. And would you entrust us with Kochees's safe keeping?”

Rohanna nodded vigorously and wiped away a tear. “Would you do that?”

“The Network has been getting people across the border into the Freelands for many years now, so I foresee no major difficulties. He'd be welcome to stay at the centre for as long as is necessary, and after that? Well, we have had two or three of the Lamas through our doors and it's likely that there will be others in the Freelands. The authorities seem quite happy to allow them in. So at some point, we could arrange for Kochees to be with his people and to continue his study. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's take this long journey one step at a time.”

Rohanna breathed a deep sigh of relief at this news. “You don't know how much this means to me, Tenzing. We have money, not a lot but sufficient to pay for ....”

Tenzing patted her hand lightly. “Rohanna, the Network has many wealthy benefactors, and this is for the Work, so the cost is not a consideration. And, yes, I think I do know how you feel.”

“So, when will your friends arrive with Kochees?” Tenzing enquired at length, breaking the silence.

“Between two and three tomorrow morning.”

“So when would it be convenient for us to take Kochees?”

“That would depend on your schedule, Tenzing.”

“There is no fixed schedule, Rohanna. Whether it be next Monday or tomorrow would make little difference to us.”

“Well, it would be good if Helmech and I could spend some time with Kochees. There's so much we need to catch up on; and at the same time there is no point in overly prolonging the

inevitable, if you know what I mean. It would actually be more merciful if we didn't get too used to one-another's company."

"Today is Thursday, the eve of Mushkil Gusha, remover of all difficulties, by good fortune or happenstance. So, why not spend tomorrow and Saturday together and we'll set off for the border first thing on Sunday? If that doesn't suit you, all you have to do is say ...."

Rohanna and Helmech exchanged fond and gratified looks. "No, that would be ideal."

"Beyond our wildest hopes, Tenzing," Helmech spoke up, having been content to merely observe until this moment. "Thank you so much. And, in the interim, let us look after you and your friends. If there is anything – *anything* – which we can do for you in return, just name it. And treat this place as a home away from home."

## 11. Worrying developments

Conrad and Dzoldzaya were standing at the stop waiting for a bus to take them into town when a car beeped its horn and pulled up just ahead of them, puffs of oily smoke belching from its rusty exhaust. They trotted down the road toward the car.

"I'm going into the city. Need a lift?" a man called through the open window. Conrad seemed to recognize the face.

"Sure, thanks." Conrad opened the front passenger door and let Dzoldzaya in, then clambered in the back.

"Dave Jones," the man introduced himself.

"Conrad and Dzoldzaya."

"Oh, right." He turned to Dzoldzaya. "You must be related to Tenzing. His niece, isn't it? I've heard about your adventures."

"Only good things, I hope," she laughed.

"Of course. I'm a friend of Randal's and an ex-student," Dave explained. "I'm covering for Harold Grainger while he's away and Tenzing is off on his jolly jaunt. I know Tenzing went off with Randal and Helen, but nobody seems to know where Harold Grainger is. He was even more cryptic than Tenzing. They're both up to something, if you ask me."

"Sorry, we're as much in the dark as you are, Dave," Dzoldzaya shrugged.

"What's your speciality?" asked Conrad.

"Computers mainly," Dave replied.

"What *is* this thing with men and computers?" Dzoldzaya wanted to know.

Dave shrugged. "Some kind of love-hate relationship? Anyhow, whereabouts would you like me to drop you off?"

"Oh, wherever's most convenient for you this side of the river, thanks, Dave," Dzoldzaya smiled.

"That's a lot of territory to have to walk on foot. Name the place and I'll take you right to the door."

Conrad told him about the message they had to deliver and that they were planning on a walk along the river, then taking in the sights and sounds of the fair.

"Sherringham Street? Oh yes, I know the place. No

problem.”

“You're sure it's not out of your way?”

“Not at all. I've got the car and I'm in no rush. In fact, I can wait until you're done there and drive you to the river side.”

“We'd hate to put you to any trouble ....” said Dzoldzaya.

“Hey, like I said, it's no trouble. There's a great little pub called *The Cooperage* down by the river where I can have a pie and a couple of pints, not necessarily in that order as Tenzing would say. You're welcome to join me ....”

“Thanks, yes, we'd like that,” nodded Dzoldzaya.

They arrived at the apartment block soon enough and without difficulty and Dave parked the car, then followed them in. It looked like the numbers on the ground floor were all in the one hundreds so, if there was any logic to the place, 435 would be on the third floor. Conrad decided to take the stairs and by the time they reached the floor, he was beginning to wish he'd taken the lift.

Finding the flat, he rang the doorbell and waited. There was no reply. After the third ring, and unsure of whether the bell was working since he couldn't hear it, he rapped loudly on the wooden panel. Still there was no reply.

He was just about to post the letter through the letterbox when Dave came forward and tried the door. He turned the handle and pushed and the door swung open with a squeak of dry hinges. A few feet down the hallway, a figure in dressing gown, pyjamas and furry slippers lay in a heap on the floor.

“Oh, shit,” gasped Dave, striding down the hallway to kneel beside the body.

There was blood from some kind of head wound and a red patch had soaked into the grey carpet. The man was clearly dead, but Dave still felt for a pulse. He shook his head and stood up.

“What do we do now?” asked Conrad. “Call the police?”

Dave shook his head. “Not on your nelly. This will have to be handled internally,” he replied.

“How?”

“Hang on there, I need to phone *Foxholes*,” Dave replied, and he went through the flat searching for a telephone.

Shortly after, he returned.

“What now?”



“Rosalie Muller is going to arrange for our people to take the body away and clean out the flat,” Dave replied, and he ushered them out of the flat and closed the door behind them.

“And what do we do?” Dzoldzaya asked.

“What *can* we do?” Dave shrugged. “So we may as well go along to *The Cooperage* and grab some lunch.”

Dzoldzaya appeared less than happy at that idea, but Dave finally brought her round.

They went with Dave to the pub and though the pub grub and beer were both a cut above the average and Dave quite a jovial and likeable bloke, they still felt a little odd enjoying themselves and unable to help whilst one of their number had so recently been murdered.

“There really is nothing we can do to help,” Dave reminded them. “I’m sorry if I sound callous, I’m just being pragmatic. Fretting is not going to do any of us, or anyone else for that matter, any good whatsoever. In this kind of situation, Tenzing would remind us that we are not ‘master of the option’ to do what is right or what needs to be done; and, that being the case, we’d be better off steering well clear of any involvement and leaving it to the professionals.”

Dave was right, of course.

After an hour or so, Dave begged leave of them and they all left the pub. He went off to do his shopping whilst they had a walk along the river bank, then headed off toward the fair. It was being held in one of the city squares and adjacent roads, which had been blocked off by the police to all but pedestrians.

Dzoldzaya stopped close to where a wizened old lady was sitting out on her front doorstep, busily knitting. Having first asked the lady’s permission, Dzoldzaya took a pad of paper and a pencil out of her shoulder bag and began to sketch the woman’s outline and pencil-in her aged features.

“What do you think, Conrad?” she asked, blowing off the residual lead and showing him the portrait.

“I’m impressed,” he nodded, comparing the sketch to the woman. It was an excellent likeness. Thanking the lady, they moved on.

There was quite a hubbub on the high street as they approached the square, with so many folk either heading toward

or leaving the fair.

They wandered slowly around the many market stalls that accompanied the fair. It was a slow process, since Dzoldzaya wished to explore them all, one by one. There were the usual stalls selling clothes and shoes; haberdashery and hardware, but Conrad avoided the temptation to buy. There was nothing cheap without good reason, as dear old Father would say. You could hardly take the goods back if they fell to pieces or failed to live up to expectation, because by then the traders would be long gone. And, inevitably, there were the charlatans peddling their universal, life-giving, remedial elixirs. Coloured water and snake oil, allegedly guaranteed to cure anything from simple headache to galloping gut rot; back pains to fever; even barrenness and “mental infirmity”.

But at last, they were through the makeshift market and into the fair proper, which was much more to Conrad's taste, marvelling at the intrepid performers spitting out great plumes of fire and quenching the flaming brands in their mouths. They watched anxiously as the artists swallowed long swords, juggled with fiery torches and threw razor-sharp knives at human targets, just missing them by the breadth of a hair. Now that took real skill, and guts which he did not possess. Dzoldzaya couldn't bear to look.

They roared with approval at the acrobats somersaulting through the air and landing on one-another's shoulders. Clutched their sides from laughter at the antics of the clowns, made up in ridiculous, particoloured clothes and greasepaint smiles. Watched with avid attention as the actors played out some comic tragedy on a stage and lampooned well-known and little loved figures of the day. They tossed coppers in the proffered hats, in avid appreciation.

And then there were the attractions in which they, too, could play a part: the donkey rides; hoops to throw over tempting prizes; skittles to knock down with bean bags; targets to hit with a bow and arrow. Ah, but these games were heavily weighted against them. The beanbags were underweight and the skittles filled with lead. The hoops were barely large enough to pass over the more worthwhile prizes. The arrows failed to fly straight through the air. Conrad was too cynical and cost conscious to

throw himself wholeheartedly into such pastimes. As for Dzoldzaya, she didn't seem to care. She could turn all that judgemental stuff off: to her, it was a fun thing to do, even if they didn't manage to win anything.

Still, they had a good time that day and they came away with an armful of wonderful cinder toffee, toffee apples, and something the like of which they'd never seen before, let alone tasted, which was called a coconut. Apparently, you were meant to pierce holes in the hard husk and drink the sweet-tasting milky water inside, then you cracked the nut open with a hammer and ate the chewy white lining.

“What did you like best?” Dzoldzaya wanted to know.

“The troubadours' poignant love ballads,” he told her.

“Me, too. But why them especially?”

“I guess I greatly envy the artists' ability to stand up in public and perform: that's something I've never been able to do.”



When Conrad got back and took the unopened letter from his jacket, he pondered over the name – Jerome Carstairs – and it occurred to him that he'd heard that name somewhere before. Then quite out of the blue he remembered the list he'd seen in one of the files on the computer disk. Perhaps that was it? Well there was only one way to find out. He headed off towards Tenzing's office to power up his computer and check through the disk.

As he entered the room he found Dave there, beavering away at the machine.

“Oh, sorry, I didn't realize someone was using Tenzing's machine ...” he apologized and turned to leave.

“Don't go: I'll only be another couple of minutes. I'm just installing the latest version of Publisher for him.”

Conrad turned back into the room and went to sit on the settee while Dave finished off.

“Something important?”

Conrad explained what had happened the other night, about swapping the disk and the possibility that Jerome Carstairs' name was on the list.

“I see. Well, I'm done here. It's all yours,” Dave invited at last. Judging by the grey-blue haze in the air and the heap of dog ends in the ashtray, he'd been there for some time.

Conrad went over to the machine, inserted the disk and used the file manager to locate the file. “Shit,” he cursed.

“What's up? Is Carstairs there?”

“No, it's not that. It's the damn disk: it's blank.”

“You're sure the files were copied to the disk?”

“Absolutely. I checked.”

“Ah ...” You could almost hear the cogs whirring away in Dave's head. Then it dawned on him. “Maybe whoever clobbered you swapped the disks and left you with the blank?”

Conrad nodded vigorously. “Yes, that's what I was thinking. And what's worse about that is that now we don't have a copy of the list.”

“How come?”

“Well, in case the assailant returned, I wiped the files from Tenzing's hard drive.”

“What command did you use?”

“Just a simple *delete*.”

Dave was up from the settee and hovering over the computer. “Let me see ....”

“Be my guest,” Conrad invited, giving up his seat.

Dave tapped away feverishly and brought up a list of recently deleted files.

“Those are the ones,” Conrad pointed: “The last six which begin with the letters 'LDV'. Not that it makes much difference since they've all been deleted.”

Dave smiled. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

Again he typed away feverishly.

“There you go. Hand me the disk and we'll copy the files across and delete them from the hard drive again.”

“How did you do that?” Conrad wanted to know. Clearly things had moved on some way since he'd been into computing.

“Using the *undelete* command.”

“Come again?”

“When you delete a file, all the system does is set a flag to say it's been deleted and may be overwritten. It doesn't touch the file itself. In this case we were lucky, the files hadn't been overwritten, and so I was able to unset the flags and restore the files.”

“Dave, you are a fucking genius. Thank you.”

“Genius maybe, but 'fucking' would be a fine thing, Conrad. I can but dream. Okay, that's the files back on the floppy. Over to you.”

They swapped places.

“Damn it all,” Conrad cursed. “Sure enough, Jerome Carstairs' name is in the file. And it gets worse: it's right at the top of the list.”

Dave sucked in his breath. “Now that *is* worrying. I think we can safely assume that they have the list ...”

Conrad completed Dave's hanging sentence: “... and perhaps that they're already working their way through it?”

Dave shrugged. “Well, I think it's early days to be drawing any conclusions: we can't know that for sure yet. Let's just hope that's not the case ....”

“... And prepare as if it were?”

“And prepare as if it were. First off, I think we'll get a couple of print outs of that list.”

## 12. The escape

Tanzin and Welbor had just entered the wharf on the way to the boat when a group of Hujardi emerged from the shadows. Yan had gone to wait for them further down river and it had been arranged that he'd be the one taking Kochees back to the inn whilst they took the boat back to the wharf.

"In the name of God, welcome," one of their number saluted them and they exchanged greetings. "You should be tucked up in bed with your women giving them what for ..."

"Where are you going on this hour?" demanded the leader of the group, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Don't you know that this is forbidden?"

"We are fishermen," Tanzin explained.

"Then fish during the day."

"We usually do, but we had to attend a relative's wedding."

"We were asked this very question yesterday," chipped in Welbor. "And we were granted free passage. Essential industries are exempt from this rule." He was lying through his teeth, of course, and praying to God that they wouldn't press the issue.

"We have to earn a living and the people need fish," Tanzin added with a shrug of his shoulders. "We have orders to fulfil. And tomorrow is Friday." Everyone ate fish on a Friday.

The leader stroked his chin thoughtfully and seemed in two minds. "I see. Very well, you may pass. But be sure to report back to us on your return."

Wishing one-another peace, the pair strode briskly off down the wharf and out of earshot before the goon changed his mind.

"If they see us on the way back, they're going to notice that we have no fish," Tanzin pointed out, pulling the boat to the edge of the wharf and holding it there while Welbor clambered aboard.

"We could hardly tell them we were going on a sightseeing tour."

"Well, we have to meet Kochees in forty minutes, and it's going to take almost that long to get to the rocks. But we have stacks of time to spare after we meet Yan before it starts getting light, so we'll just have to see if we can catch a few fish on the

way back.”

“Okay Tanzin, cast off, we'd better get under way.”

The river was very wide around Om Dor, so the waters flowed relatively slowly, but it was still hard rowing against the flow. The temple-city sat atop a hill in an oxbow so that the river surrounded it on three sides. To the west, the temple-city could be accessed via the rope suspension bridge which was now controlled by the Hujardi; to the north, the neck of the oxbow, were tall cliffs which could only be scaled by expert climbers; to the south and east were rocks which could only be reached by boat, and this is where they were heading. They kept well to the east behind the hill, out of sight of onlookers near the bridge.

When they arrived, Tanzin leapt from the boat, taking the mooring rope with him and he tied it around a nearby boulder whilst Welbor remained aboard, ready to man the oars.

Tanzin clambered over the rocks by the shore and began the steep ascent. There was no path here on this side of the hill and the going was tough. He kept peering up toward the crenelated walls high above him, looking for signs of life, but he could see none.

Finally, as he topped the hill and stood below the high walls, he caught sight of a shadowy figure peering down.

“Who goes there?” came a call from above.

“Tanzin. I've come for Kochees. Is he here?”

“Wait there.”

High above him, Tanzin saw more movement on the battlements, but the crescent moon, little as it was, had gone behind a cloud and he couldn't quite make out what was going on. Then he saw another figure, standing between two of the crenelations.

“It's so high. I don't want to do this,” he heard the figure call.

“Shhh. You must. Just close your eyes and you'll be safely on the ground in just a few seconds.”

Slowly but surely, the figure was lowered over the wall. When the figure touched the ground, Tanzin went forward to help. It was a boy of perhaps eight or nine years of age, with short black hair and a ponytail, cut in the style of the Lamas.

Tanzin found the knotted end of the rope and tried to undo it but could not. Clearly the Lamas had a thing or two to learn about

knots which came as second nature to fishermen such as himself. One's life or livelihood could depend on a single knot.

He took out his knife and the boy flinched and backed away.

"It's all right, Kochees. I'm not here to harm you. I must cut the knotted rope."

The boy reluctantly let him approach and he severed the rope with his long knife.

"Okay, he's clear."

"Godspeed to you, friend," one of the figures called down from above.

"Take care," he called back. Taking the boy's hand, he guided him down the hill. The grass was quite slippery and their feet slid from under them on two or three occasions, but fortunately no harm was done.

"Who are you?" the boy wanted to know.

"I'm a friend, and I'm here to take you to your mother and father, Rohanna and Helmech."

Finally they reached the rocks. "I'm going to have to let go of your hand, so be careful here, Kochees. Down near the water's edge the boulders are green and slippery."

The boy took one look at the tumbled boulders in the gloom and stood stock still.

"Come on, Kochees, we have little time. We must get you away from here."

"I might fall and break my neck," the boy replied, rooted to the spot. "You should carry me. It's your duty."

Tanzin shook his head. "With respect, your eminence, if I were to carry you, it's more than likely that we'd both end up breaking our necks. And then where would we be? If I'd thought, I'd have brought along a magic red carpet for you to walk upon. Now come on."

He grabbed the lad's arm and dragged him onto the rocks and, ignoring Kochees's protestations, he managed to get them safely to the boat.

Once the lad was aboard, Tanzin cast off, then clambered in after the lad. He took up one of the oars and pushed the boat away from the rocks, then pointed the boat down stream. Fortunately the flow was with them on this return journey and it was a lot easier going. They kept to the centre of the river until they were



well clear of the hill, then turned the boat toward the spot where they had arranged to meet Yan.

As they approached, not quite sure where they should land, Tanzin saw Yan on the banks. He was standing there waving a white rag in his hand. Tanzin lifted an oar to signal that he'd seen Yan and the figure put away his rag and crouched low in the grass to await their arrival.

Tanzin stepped out of the boat and heaved on the rope to bring it close into the bank. "Okay, Kochees, out you get."

Again the boy hesitated, unsteady on his feet as the rowing boat rocked from side to side.

Yan went forward and reached out his hand. The lad resisted, but he half-dragged him from the boat and safely onto land.

"Let's get going, Tanzin," Welbor advised him.

"One last thing before I go," Tanzin called back. He pulled out his trusty knife and walked over to Kochees who shrank back.

"It's all right, lad, I'm not going to hurt you. Turn around."

"What for?"

"You'll see, soon enough."

Tanzin grabbed hold of the end of the boy's ponytail and began to cut through the mass of hair with his knife.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" Kochees protested, but Yan held him firmly in his arms.

The deed was done. Tanzin tossed the mass of hair into the river.

"Why did you do that? You had no right," Kochees demanded to know.

"I thought you were the wise one, your eminence? Sometimes friends have to be cruel to be kind. If the Hujardi caught sight of that precious Lamaist ponytail of yours, you and my good friend Yan would like as not meet a far worse fate, with your head on a block at the wrong end of the executioner's axe."

"Is that what the Hujardi do to the Lamas?" the boy asked, looking quite shocked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Tanzin lied, having seen with his own eyes the far more cruel and gruesome fate that some of the Lamas had recently met. He'd seen one dragged feet first and naked through the streets by a horse until the skin and features had been scoured from his body, while others – refusing to convert to their

assailants' faith, which would have spared their lives – had been repeatedly cut with razor-sharp blades in a macabre public spectacle, and left to slowly bleed to death.

“I was told that others had escaped to sanctuary. I was told they went to prepare the way ....”

“Perhaps some have, but I'm sorry to say that most have perished.”

The lad shuddered at the thought and seemed unable to speak.

“Now off you go,” said Tanzin, giving Kochees a hug and turning back to the boat. “And may God go with you.”

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“Right, young man,” smiled Yan, dipping into his haversack and pulling out a bundle of clothes. “Let's get you out of those fine robes and into something a little more suitable.”

Kochees sifted through the garments and didn't look particularly impressed, but he nevertheless complied. “Turn your back,” he requested as he began to unwrap his robe. An insistent “Please” came as an afterthought.

Yan turned around and walked some distance away to afford the lad some privacy.

“Now you may look.”

Yan turned back and gave him the thumbs up, happy with the transformation. “Very good.”

“I look like a wretched serf,” the lad complained.

“And that's just as it should be, young man,” Yan replied. “Better a living serf than a dead Lama.”

“You may put my robes in your haversack,” the lad told him, handing over the pile of neatly folded clothes. Yan took the clothes from him, pulled an old Hessian sack from his back pack and thrust the clothes inside. Then, picking up a number of heavy rocks from the river bank, he dumped these inside the sack, tied up the neck with some cord and hurled the sack into the river. Within seconds it became waterlogged and began to sink. Kochees appeared horrified by this act, but said nothing.

“Right, young man, we'd better get moving. Your mother and father are fearful enough without us adding to their worries by arriving late.”

Even though they kept to the side streets on their way back, it

took them what seemed like an age to cross the city. They had to cross many main roads along the meandering route and keep their eyes peeled for the Hujardi who patrolled the city even at night, though fortunately in far fewer numbers than during the day. Every now and again they'd have to duck down an alley or press themselves into the shadows and wait, wait and wait again until the danger had passed.

They were just crossing one main road when a pickup truck turned the corner to their left. Keeping their heads down, Yan and Kochees scurried across the road, praying that they would not be seen.

As chance would have it, the driver of the truck was momentarily distracted by one of the passengers who was leching over a set of photographs they'd confiscated of a scantily-clad woman posing in various states of disarray and showing off her wares, so he didn't see the pair duck into a nearby alleyway.

But also as chance would have it, one of the other vigilantes who was riding in the back of the truck rapped on the back window and anxiously requested that the truck driver pull over and stop, because he had to answer the urgent call of nature. The hot and spicy meal that he'd eaten at a road side kiosk earlier that evening, and which the vendor must have laced with a potent laxative or rancid meat, had passed through his system and was making its fiery and vengeful presence felt. Come morning, when they paid the vendor a return visit, he would pay dearly for his treachery.

Spotting the truck pulling up adjacent to the alleyway, Yan grabbed hold of Kochees by the arm, pulled him away and ran away down the alley with the lad in tow.

The vigilante spotted them straight away, but such was his predicament that all he could do was shout out to his confederates and have them chase after the escaping figures, whilst he took care of his own, dire needs.

At the end of the alleyway, Yan and Kochees came across yet another main road, but there was nothing for it now but to throw caution to the wind and dash straight across the gravel, frantically looking around them for fresh cover.

On and on they ran, with the Hujardi still in heated pursuit, occasionally firing their weapons, though wildly and with little

chance of hitting the escapees; calling out threats and curses and words of alarm to any of their kin in the area who might take up the chase.

To their right, Yan caught sight of a figure standing by an open door, brought outside by the rifle fire and shouting. This was no time to stand on ceremony. Yan dashed straight toward the open door, tugging Kochees along behind him, barged straight past the bewildered home owner and slammed and hastily locked the door behind them.

“W-what do you want?” stammered the anxious man, cowering in the hallway.

Yan smiled and waved his hands in the air reassuringly. “We mean you no harm, friend.”

He was thinking fast. “Is there another way out of here?”

“Y-yes.” The man pointed down the passage toward the rear of the property.

“Thank you,” Yan smiled, momentarily clasping the man's hand. He tugged Kochees away and headed off down the passage, through a small living room and a cold scullery, until he found the back door. Quickly unbolting the door, he and Kochees ran across the yard, out through the back gate and were away down the narrow, rubbish-strewn alley, just as the Hujardi were pounding on the front door. Fortunately for them, the home owner held up the Hujardi just long enough for them to make their escape and again lose their pursuers in the warren of back streets. That had been a close call, and doubtless they'd face yet more danger before they managed to smuggle Kochees out of this God-forsaken city.

Finally, however, they arrived. At the end of the long dark alley, Yan fumbled in his pockets, found the brass key he'd been lent and unlocked the wooden gate. He ushered Kochees inside, locking the gate securely behind him and sliding the heavy bolts into place, then led the way down the garden. Climbing up onto the veranda, he tapped lightly on the door and waited.

A light came on in the room beyond and Rohanna let them in, with Helmech hovering behind her. Rohanna was clearly transported by joy and dashed out onto the veranda to hug her son, with Helmech following after, and she showered him with kisses, the tears flooding from her eyes. Yan went inside to give

Kochees and his mother and father some privacy. This was an important moment for the family.

## 13. Erring on the side of caution

To be on the safe side, Dave and Rosalie spent the rest of that evening working their way down the list and ringing the people to warn them to be extra vigilant. They managed to get hold of all but four of them, and since it was by now getting quite late, the rest would have to wait until morning. And if they couldn't get a reply then, he and Conrad would have to pay them a visit.

Needless to say, neither Conrad nor Dzoldzaya got much sleep that night and they were woken early the next morning by Dave who was anxious to make a start. As for breakfast, they grabbed a slice of toast and a quick coffee and they were off, leaving a plume of oily smoke in their wake, in Dave's clapped out car, and leaving Rosalie to man the fort and make arrangements.

Of those whom Dave had managed to contact the previous evening, reactions to the news had been mixed. One or two, though voicing concern and pledging vigilance, had nevertheless declined offers of assistance, deciding to carry on business as usual. Some were already making arrangements to have their families move in temporarily with relatives, but were determined to remain at their posts. One, an ex-naval lieutenant by the name of Briggs, reported he was well armed and ready to repel all boarders, whilst another had demanded that the Network rehouse him immediately and provide him with a fresh identity, a complicated task which had Rosalie up even earlier than them that morning. And one or two of the more elderly had been clearly unnerved by the news so, at her suggestion, Rosalie was making arrangements for them to be collected and to stay at *Foxholes* for the time being.

It took longer than anticipated to get in contact with the remaining four folk on the list. They arrived at the first house and received no reply, so they tried the neighbours and eventually found out that the guy owned a carpet warehouse right across the other side of the city. Rather than make what might be a wasted journey, they found a nearby phone box and rang the business, only to find out that the man was away from the office for a

couple of days visiting suppliers, so all they could do was leave a message with his secretary asking him to contact Rosalie as a matter of some urgency. The secretary did say she'd try to get hold of her boss at the supplier he had scheduled in his diary for that morning, but couldn't promise anything. Still, this was better than nothing.

The second and third on the list were equally messy, involving much to-ing and fro-ing across the city, and after all that their stomachs were empty and gurgling, so they decided to stop off at a local café and get some food inside them before tackling the last on the list.

## 14. The door to door salesman

Frederick James looked at his watch. He'd overslept again and damn it, if he didn't get a move on he'd miss his bus.

"See you later, dear," smiled Millie, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "And don't be home late today: remember we have dinner with Jackie and Bill."

"Okay. Have a good day, Millie."

"Promise?"

"Promise what?"

"That you won't be late home today. Don't you ever listen?"

"Oh yes, um ... er ..."

"Dinner with Jackie and Bill."

"Of course. Yes, I promise," he called as Millie headed for the front door.

Frederick James was just spooning the remains of his cereal into his mouth when he heard the door bell ring. Either the postie or else Millie had forgotten her keys again. He put the dish down, hurriedly straightened up his tie in the mirror and made for the door.

"Good morning, squire ..."

He took one look at the man in a seedy grey suit and trilby hat and the open suitcase in his arms. "Not today, thank you," he muttered and closed the door in the salesman's face.

He was just putting on his jacket when the door bell rang a second time. In a huff, he snatched up his keys and headed back toward the door. The man was still standing there on the doorstep waiting.

"I said not now. Can't you see I'm getting ready for work? And I'm running late."

The man stuck his foot in the door.

"Perhaps I might interest you in our new range of pump action household sprays, sir?"

The man thrust a bright yellow object in his face and fired three short bursts directly in his face.

His hands went up to wipe his face. "Confound it, man. What the hell do you think you're playing ...."



That's as far as Frederick got. He was cut off mid-sentence, feeling suddenly frightfully short of breath.

The man raised his trilby as Frederick slumped to the floor, fighting for breath. "Sorry to have bothered you, sir," the man said, closing the door behind him.

Just as he was turning onto the pavement at the bottom of the front garden, Folkstone saw two men and a woman heading his way.

"Good day to you, madam," he beamed, raising his trilby as they came towards him. "Could I interest you in some fine household cleaning products?"

One of them mumbled something distasteful in response, and the three walked straight past him. Seeing them turn into the garden, heading for the door, Folkstone hoofed it toward the car.

"Mission accomplished, Mister Folkstone?"

"Indeed, but make haste, Mister Hilder. The man has visitors."

"Ah."

Hilder let out the hand brake, scrunched the car into gear, pulled out – narrowly missing a passing cyclist – and headed off down the road post-haste.

## 15. Betrayal

As Captain Ozark Nadir passed down the corridor that evening, he noticed activity in the chambers of one of the High Lamas, and popped his head in the door out of curiosity.

"It's only me," he called to the Lamas inside. "Just going about my rounds and I saw that the light was on."

The Lamas exchanged greetings with him and continued about their business. The clothes had been stripped from the bed which stood against the far wall, and whilst one of them was emptying the wardrobe and passing the garments to his companion to be folded and stacked, another was taking books and assorted knick-knacks from the shelves and carefully packing them away.

"What's going on?" Nadir enquired in a casual tone.

"High Lama Kochees Krane is no longer with us," came the reply. "And he won't be needing these things where he is going."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Nadir sympathized. "Was this sudden or had he been ill for some time?"

"No, no," smiled one of the Lamas, "Kochees has not died. Thanks be to God and to the Lama's family, he is on his way to sanctuary as I speak."

"Family?"

"They arranged for him to escape the temple-city and take refuge in the hostelry they run."

"Krane, Krane? You know, I'm sure I've heard that name before. Oh, hang on a minute, don't they have an inn on West Street?"

"I'm sorry, it's been so long since I've been on the streets of Om Dor, I couldn't say."

"No, no," chipped in one of the younger Lamas. "I've taken Kochees to see his parents on a couple of occasions. I can't recall the name of the inn, but it's on High Market."

"Oh, yes, of course," nodded Nadir. "I've passed it a few times. *The Knagg's Head*, I believe."

"Yes, that's the one. *The Knagg's Head*."

"Well, good luck to the lad and nice talking with you,"

concluded Nadir, clicking his heels together in salute. "Now, if you'll forgive me, I must finish my rounds."

Once out of the room, Captain Ozark Nadir headed straight for his office. Taking up his pen he hastily scribbled a note on a sheet of paper and dabbed it on his blotting pad to dry the ink. Then he carefully folded up the paper, rummaged in his drawers for a length of string, pocketed the note and string and left his office.

He headed out of the building and through the grounds toward the western gate, passing through the gardens on the way and selecting a large flat stone that would serve as a paperweight. As he walked, he tied the note to the stone and pocketed it once more.

As he entered the western tower, a sentry who'd been enjoying a quiet nap jumped up out of his seat and sprang to attention.

"It's all right, relax soldier. I'm just going for a look over the walls to see what the Hujardi are up to."

"Would you like me to escort you, sir?" asked the guard.

"No, no. I'll go alone."

"As you wish, sir."

Nadir headed for the tower up the narrow, winding stone steps, but rather than go all the way up to the top, he passed through an archway half way up to walk around the wall. He walked on until he came to the spot where the Hujardi had set up their catapult. Fortunately they appeared to be experiencing technical difficulties and their attempts so far had not made it over the wall.

There was a sentry posted a little further along and the captain briefly engaged him in conversation. Apparently there was nothing new to report. Nadir dismissed the soldier and waited until his back was briefly turned, then tossed the weighted note over the battlements in the direction of the Hujardi who'd made camp not far from the siege engine. He made these message drops periodically, so the Hujardi would be on the lookout for his notes. If the note wasn't found that evening, then it would certainly be found first thing the next day.

## 16. Fourth on the list

The last guy on the list seemed to have changed his phone number just recently, gone ex-directory and forgotten to let the Network know his new number. Either that or Tenzing hadn't gotten round to updating his own records. Thus, Dave, Conrad and Dzoldzaya had to pay him a visit.

As they left the car and approached the house, an unctuous little man tried to stop them in the street. It looked like he was selling something.

"Piss off," muttered Dave, and they walked on by, turned into the front garden and headed up the path toward the front door.

Dave rang the bell a couple of times, then tried the door. It was open. "Hello? Anyone home?" he called out, opening the door wide.

Ahead of them, in the hallway, a man lay crumpled on the floor.

"Victim number two," announced Dave, going inside and checking for a pulse. "Dead as a dodo," he remarked. "And still quite warm."

"The victim has a name: it's Frederick James," Dzoldzaya corrected him. Then: "Is it me, or can you smell something in the air? It's getting to the back of my throat."

Dave sniffed the air.

"Smells like some kind of cleaning product."

They all had the same idea simultaneously: "The salesman."

Dave was back out of the door and down the garden path in a flash, just as the car was speeding away down the road, already too far distant to get the number plate.

"Fuck," he cursed, turning back toward them.

"Close the door behind you," Dave advised. "We'll have to give Rosalie another call and get the clean-up team here."

Then: "You know that rather complicates matters," he added, scanning through the list.

"What does?" asked Dzoldzaya.

"The first victim – correction, Jerome Carstairs – was at the top of the list. Frederick James was the second last. I was hoping

that whoever it was would simply work his way down the list, and might be caught that way. But we can't have someone watch every single one of the field operatives 24/7 ....”

“So what do you suggest? We can't go to the authorities,” Dzoldzaya pointed out.

Dave shrugged. “The only sensible option might be to call the people in and have them stay at *Foxholes*, where we *can* keep an eye on them. That way, the assailants will have to come to *us*. But with Tenzing and Harold Grainger incommunicado, that will require Rosalie's authorization.”

## 17. A dull thud

Druz Kalim heard the dull thud on the earth as the note landed. Looking up, he caught a fleeting sight of the plumed helmet of one of the Lamasery Guards disappearing behind the battlements on the wall high above.

Looking furtively about him, he sauntered across the grass, bent down and picked up the weighted note. Untying the string, he unfolded the note and read the contents.

“What's that?” came a voice to his left.

There was no point in lying. “It's another message,” he replied.

“Let me have it.”

“I'll take it to Tamil,” Druz replied, striding across toward Tamil's tent before the other could intervene.

Their squad leader was sitting in the entrance to his tent, sucking on a pipe full of illicit tobacco and opium. The man had Druz read out the note for him. Not only was Tamil looking distinctly bog-eyed, he was also illiterate, though he would never admit it.

In his semi-delirium, Tamil seemed unsure as to what he should do about the matter, so Druz snatched the opportunity to make his mind up for him. “This is important intelligence, Tamil.”

“Hmm, hmm,” Tamil nodded, staring glassy-eyed in Druz's direction.

“In view of the urgency, I should take it to Bardo straight away.”

“Hmm, yes. You do that. And straight away, mind you.” Tamil waved him away and went back to his pipe before collapsing backwards in the entrance of his tent.

Druz was away before the man could change his mind.

Bardo was the chief of their holy warrior clan and had taken up residence in a plush hotel across the city which he was using, ostensibly, as his base of operations.



“What do you want here?” a Hujardi challenged him as he headed up the marble steps of the hotel toward the door.

"I have a message for Bardo."

"Bugger off and come back in the morning," the man retorted. "Bardo gave instructions that he's not to be disturbed."

"It's urgent intelligence from one of our spies in the temple-city. Tamil told me to come here straight away."

The guard held out his hand. "Let me see."

Druz shook his head. "The message is for Bardo's attention."

"Wait here." The man turned on his heel and went inside, calling to another of his comrades to guard the door whilst he was away.

Ten long minutes later, the man reappeared. "Follow me," he said gruffly.

He was led through the hotel foyer and along a corridor past the banqueting hall. They stopped outside a pair of fine rosewood doors which were guarded by two more Hujardi and his escort rapped loudly. An attendant opened the door and, seeing who it was, requested that Druz enter. The invitation was not extended to his escort, who went away huffing and puffing at the slight.

"This had better be important," boomed a voice from further down the room. It was Bardo and he was fastening up his dressing gown as he approached. Druz heard a tittering behind Bardo and a scantily-dressed woman scurried away into a side room.

Bardo came uncomfortably close, standing there and almost pushing his face into Druz's. And the man reeked of drink, stale tobacco and altogether too much cheap *eau de toilette*. The hotel was reputed to have the finest wine cellar in the city.

"Well?"

Druz fumbled in his pocket and brought out the note. Bardo held the paper out at arm's length and squinted to read the writing.

At length he screwed the paper into a ball and tossed it across the room.

"Right," he roared, abruptly coming to a decision. "Parkin? Parkin!"

The attendant came scurrying across the room to stand cowering before him. "Yes, sir?"

"Get my clothes, Parkin, and then rouse the guard. We're going Lama hunting. Think they can sneak away in the night, do they, these wretched idolaters?" As Bardo spoke, he thumped the

air. “Well, if they think that, they've got another thing coming, I'll tell you. They have got another thing coming.”

Bardo stood there with his hands on his hips and stared at Druz. “Are you still here?” he demanded. “Thank you very muchly and be sure to send my regards to Tamil. Now sod off.”

Druz had clearly overstayed his welcome and made for the door.



## 18. The round-up

By mid-afternoon that day, the first of the recalled field operatives arrived at *Foxholes*, in the shape of a rather ruddy-faced and gangly looking college professor by the name of Melanie Drake, with her more chubby partner Malcolm, who also worked for the Network, weighed down with the first of several bulky suitcases. They had two small bundles of energy in tow.

Rosalie had drafted in Philip Rowbottom to help greet the new arrivals at the door and guide them through to the staff common room. He was a dependable and thoroughly affable chap who taught language and literature at *Foxholes* and handled a lot of the public relations. He had an incredible ability to retain and take account of the tiniest detail, though this trait did sometimes verge on the obsessional and the ridiculous. He was forever going around the place straightening things up. The students paintings and masters' portraits which lined the corridors; even his neighbours' knives and forks – if a thing was out of alignment, he simply couldn't help himself. Some of the students called him “anal retentive” which was perhaps true and yet grossly unrepresentative of Rowbottom in the round.

After the Drakes came the Galloping Major. Sir Horatio Ponsonby-Smythe, no less, who didn't look at all the way Rosalie had pictured him when she'd phoned him up and requested his prompt return to HQ. He'd ummed and ahed for some time, repeatedly calling her Madam, which was something she could not abide, especially when used in a condescending fashion, and he'd complained that he was currently without transport. She'd politely suggested he might take a taxi or the bus, but that idea had not gone down well – being cooped up with the great unwashed *hoi polloi* and assorted riff-raff, and all that, not was not quite his cup of cocoa – and so, busy as they all were, she'd reluctantly had to send out one of the staff to collect him.

And a few minutes later came a rather unlikely couple, Clement Wilkins and Leslie Stockley. Clement was built like a brick shit house, if you'll excuse the language, and worked in the sewers, whilst his partner Leslie was so dainty and effeminate,

looking every inch the *prima ballerina*, and worked on an evening in a bawdy music hall. Apparently he doubled up as an usherette and sold ice-cream and popcorn during the interval ... and possibly, though the rumour had not been confirmed, sold his body after the final curtain call. You wouldn't think it to look at the chap, but as a youth he travelled with a circus as a daredevil trapeze artist. Leslie Stockley had been in trouble with the police for pickpocketing, once over, but had managed to keep his nose clean since then.

Since Matron was only just beginning to double-up some of the younger students and reallocate the empty rooms, Rosalie had a couple of the lads help out with the bags and one of the girls steer the arrivals toward the staff common room where Conrad, Dzoldzaya and three of the senior girls were stationed to play the good host and keep them entertained.

It soon became clear by the fidgeting bottoms and moans that it would take more than that to keep the children amused, so Dzoldzaya had Rosalie cancel lessons for the rest of the day and drafted in some more of the pupils to help out. She suggested that they might take the children off and closely supervise them in the computer room, the art workshop, the library or out in the grounds: whichever most took the children's fancy.

At six o'clock several more of their people had arrived and since they'd be coming in in dribs and drabs, rather than having to keep the cafeteria open, Cook had laid on a standing buffet that she could add to whenever the fare became depleted and without the food becoming stale.

The Reverend Timothy Bryce was another strange character, sitting there with the Good Book in one hand, waving it around animatedly as he talked ... and talked, and talked relentlessly ... and a hip flash of whisky in the other, to which he seemed equally attached and just as partial. The field operatives led quite clandestine lives and usually kept well clear of *Foxholes*, so this was the first time that Rosalie had set eyes on the vast majority, though there were one or two faces she recollected from the school's annual open day and could only now put a name to.

Then there was Sylvester Valentine, at least that was his stage name. He was actually plain old Derek Shecklewig in real life. He was such a nervous and self-conscious chap. Coming

from a poor, working class family – and without wishing to offend, nor mock the afflicted – Derek might be best described as an *idiot savant*, meaning that although he had some kind of intellectual and social disability, from an early age he'd shown prodigious ability at both mathematics and music. Indeed, he'd gone on to become a mathematician by day and something of a pianist by night.

Philip Rowbottom was in his element that day and he was doing the rounds making sure everyone's needs were well catered for. He introduced himself again and shook hands with Derek Shecklewig, pumping the man's hand for quite some time. He did his best to strike up a conversation with the man, asking him what he did for a living, but he was unable to get more than a few fairly incoherent syllables out of Derek other than the words “mathematician” and “concert pianist” and begged leave, looking little the wiser.

Rosalie had hoped she might have been able to prevail upon Derek and entice him to tinkle the old ebony and ivory at the piano in the corner of the staff common room, to provide them with some welcome light relief, but he'd seemed rather preoccupied, which she put down to the worry of recent events, and had politely declined, and so she hadn't pressed him further.

As more folk arrived, so the dynamic of the assembled group changed. When there'd been just three or four, they'd been pretty quiet and quite amiable, but now some of them were becoming more agitated and two or three were voicing their anger that “The Powers that Be”, meaning Tenzing and his deputies, should have allowed such a thing to happen. It didn't help any that Tenzing and Harold Grainger should be away at this crucial time. And, inevitably, the conversation swung around to how long this was going to go on for, the topic of money and who was going to reimburse them for lost earnings.

Unable to bear this any longer, one of the older ladies, the veritable Miss Felicity Anne Fotherhugh, no less, who'd been quiet all this time stood up and called out: “For heaven's sake, have you people listened to yourselves? You're like a gaggle of bitter old washerwomen, rather than friends of the Tradition.”

Someone opened her mouth and spouted some nonsense, but the old lady silenced her in short measure. “Madam, as my dear

departed hubby would say: if you had two brain cells to rub together, you'd be dangerous.”

Miss Fotherhugh swung round and wagged her finger menacingly. “And don't you start, sir: I'll have you know, I've had more troubles over the years than you've had hot dinners, but you won't hear me complaining. When you start moaning about the hole in the sole of your shoe, just you remember that some folk have to make do with no blessed feet. That puts our petty problems in perspective, doesn't it? Well, *doesn't* it?”

My, she was a feisty old bird, Dzoldzaya smiled to herself. You tell 'em, girl.

“Friends,” the old lady continued, sinking back down in her armchair, “we should be pulling together, like we did during the war, not tearing ourselves apart. You should be thoroughly ashamed.” And for a time there was stunned silence, before they all started up again.

Finally the last few stragglers arrived, just in time to polish off the remainder of the buffet.

“Shall I brew some tea now, Rosalie?” enquired Cook, as she began to clear away the buffet.

“Yes, that would be a good idea, Missus Morgan, and you might add some *chungari*. Some of these folk could do with calming down a little.”

Cook gave her a knowing wink.

“And then you must clock off: it's very generous of you to have given us so much of your time.”

“You're welcome,” Cook replied, leaving the silver trolley for the time being and heading for the kitchens.

As Rosalie had hoped, the *chungari* did have a soothing effect on them and the conversation took a more pleasing turn. Even Horatio Ponsonby-Smythe, who'd been one of the more vocal antagonists seemed a little more mellow, though he had shocking habits for one supposedly so well bred, slurping up the spilt tea from his saucer and picking his nose and eating it when he thought nobody was looking. Also, given that he came from an older, less tolerant and at times bigoted generation, it came as no great surprise that the man was openly hostile toward Clement Wilkins and his partner Leslie Stockley, quoting scripture and referring to gay men as sodomites, though – given Clement's size

and physique – the Galloping Major was prudent enough not to say this to their face.

Last to arrive that evening, in the nick of time to drain the teapot, having just finished his shift, was Inspector Gerald Jackson. He was a detective in the Sher Point police, though with a higher allegiance to the Network, and Rosalie made a special point of having a word with the man and bringing him up to speed about the recent developments. He'd be staying at Foxholes for the time-being, but would return to work each day, though he did promise to see what he could do in his spare time. If necessary, he could always try to arrange a few days leave which, as fortune would have it, the station owed him.

Matron came in a few minutes later to say that she'd managed to sort out rooms for everyone and, after rounding up some hands to help with the luggage, Rosalie invited them to follow Matron upstairs.

When the room had emptied, Rosalie turned to Dzoldzaya and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "Well, I don't know about you, girl, but I'm feeling quite bushed."

"... And this is only the first day," Dzoldzaya noted.

"Oh, please don't remind me," Rosalie sighed. "I do hope that Tenzing isn't away too much longer. He's so much better at handling these things than I am."

Dzoldzaya shook her head from side to side. "Don't put yourself down, Rosalie, I think you've coped magnificently."

## 19. The raid

Later that night, two pickup trucks quietly pulled up outside *The Knagg's Head*. As his squad of Hujardi clambered out and lined up along the pavement, and his driver went around the side of the truck to open the door for him, Bardo casually stepped out of the cab and smoothed himself down.

Bardo took out his pocket watch and studied the dial.

"Time, sir?"

"Time, indeed," Bardo nodded to his deputy.

At his signal, a burly Hujardi stalked forward and shoulder charged the door. With the full force of his bulky physique behind it, the door frame splintered and the door crashed open. He stood aside as his comrades entered the hallway at the double, bursting in and searching each room they came to.

"What in heaven's name is going on?" called a voice from the top of the stairs. A man, dressed in pyjamas, gown and night cap was coming down the stairs towards them, waving a wooden walking stick menacingly. "What do you think you're doing, bursting in here and scaring the living daylights out of my wife and young son?"

"And who's going to pay for that damage," the man spluttered.

Bardo stood and faced the man, hands on hip. "We have intelligence that one of the High Lamas has escaped from the temple-city and is being harboured here."

"That's nonsense."

"You three, search upstairs. And you are?"

"Helmech Krane. I own this property, I'll have you know. You're trespassing on my property."

"And the Lama, Kochees Krane, he is your son?"

"Well yes, but the High Lamas took him from us when he was only four. I haven't seen him in an age. The temple-city is forbidden to us."

"My intelligence suggests otherwise."

"Then your intelligence is patently wrong," the man replied adamantly.

One of the Hujardi came downstairs again, leading some of the other occupants. He lined them up in the hallway.

“And who are you?” he asked a woman who was fumbling to put on her mask. He tore the mask from her grasp and cast it to the floor. “Who are you, woman?”

“Rohanna Krane,” she stammered.

“And this?” Bardo pointed to a boy who stood cowering close to the woman. “Is this the Lama, Kochees Krane?”

“No, no, no. That is my son, Leith. He helps out around the inn. Here:” She spun the lad round. “You only have to look at him to see he's not a Lama.”

The Hujardi who'd been searching the rooms on the ground floor returned to report that they'd found nothing and shortly after that, the others returned from upstairs to report the same.

“What now, sir?” asked Bardo's deputy.

Bardo thought for a moment, then turned to the landlord.

“You know, I could raze this building – with you still inside it – if I felt so minded.”

“On whose authority?” Helmech demanded to know.

Bardo cast his eyes heavenward. “There is only one true authority,” he replied. “And if He wills it, then be assured the building will be razed and you will know for sure who wields authority.”

The woman looked to him with sorrowful, pleading eyes. For a moment, he seemed unable to break free of her gaze.

“You wouldn't want to do that,” she said softly. “You're a generous man. Perhaps a mistake has been made?”

“Cover yourself, woman,” he spluttered, averting his eyes.

The woman knelt down to retrieve the white mask by his feet and fumbled to put it on.

He had a sudden change of heart. “Then again, it may be that the intelligence I received was flawed. I am, indeed, a generous man and I'll allow you the benefit of my doubt, on this occasion. But I'll be watching you. And rest assured that God sees all.”

And with that, Bardo turned and left, with the others following in his wake.

“And the damage to the door?” the man called after him.

“Don't push your luck, old timer. A thorough search for contraband could cause untold damage to your property,” Bardo

retorted, climbing into his truck. "Take me back to the hotel, Parkin, I have some rudely interrupted pleasure to resume.

"And that man who brought me this flawed intelligence and sent me on a wild goose chase. Find him and bring him to me. No, I don't want any lame excuses, Parkin. Scour the city if you have to. If this Lama does not pay then someone else must, in order that honour is preserved.

"Oh, and one last thing. Give these people seven days – time enough for them to think they have fooled me and have got away with their crime. On the evening of the eighth day, come here again and burn the hostelry to the ground."

"But, sir, they may be innocent."

Bardo puffed out his chest and fingered Parkin's collar. "Are you questioning me, you insolent wretch?"

"Oh, no sir. Not at all."

"Then do as I say, no questions asked. Do you hear?"

"Yes sir, indeed sir," Parkin replied, bowing before Bardo as he held the door of the pickup truck open. "Your wish is my command."

Bardo stepped aboard and Parkin scurried around to the driver's side and clambered aboard.

"If they are innocent, Parkin, then they will die as martyrs and gain entrance to paradise. And if they are guilty, they will roast in the fiery pits of hell. Either way, this will serve as a warning to others of a similar ilk. Now do you see the wisdom of my decree?"

"Oh, indeed so, sir." Parkin nodded as he fumbled to turn the key in the ignition. "You are truly wise."



## 20. Close to home

As the guests began to arrive downstairs the following morning for breakfast, Rosalie was on hand to steer them toward the cafeteria.

“There's no waitress service and we don't stand on ceremony: just go to the counter and help yourselves to cereal. The staff will assist you with whatever cooked breakfast you fancy,” she encouraged them. “Don't stint yourselves: there's plenty to go around, though it's not all cooked and on display at the same time.”

This arrangement seemed to please everyone, with the notable exception of the Galloping Major, who insisted that he be waited on, and rather than argue the point, Rosalie bit her lip and served him herself. She had hoped that, seeing himself in the mirror, the man might have thought again, but this was not to be. Sooner or later, he'd have to come back in for his refresher course, though, so she'd bide her time and ensure that they really did put him through the wringer next time.

When everybody had assembled and Rosalie was tucking into her own bacon and eggs, something was nagging at her, but she couldn't quite verbalize the thought. It was that something was not quite right. She cast her eyes around the cafeteria, peering into the faces, but everything appeared to be in order, so she dismissed the idea and buttered a slice of toast to mop up the stray yolk from her runny egg.

And then it hit her, out of the blue, almost making her spill the tea from the cup she had pressed to her lips. She lowered her cup, rose to her feet and scanned the room. The old lady, Felicity Anne Fotherhugh, and her friend Gertrude had not emerged from their rooms that morning.

Rosalie put her cup down heavily in the saucer, pushed her chair back and dashed out of the cafeteria. Seeing Conrad and Dzoldzaya standing in the corridor chatting, she called out to them. “Come with me,” she requested. “I'll explain on the way.”

Puffed out with running up the stairs and through the rambling corridors, Rosalie stood for a moment to catch her

breath, then knocked loudly on the door panel. There was no reply. Her hand on the door handle, she took a deep breath, and burst into the room. Gertrude Heppingstall lay there in bed, with the bedclothes pulled up to her shoulders, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Rosalie's heart lurched and immediately her worst thoughts were confirmed.

The bedclothes were strangely gathered up around Gertrude's chest and, flinging the bedclothes back, wondering whether there was any sense in checking for a pulse, Rosalie saw why. She recoiled in horror at the wooden object protruding from Gertrude's chest. There was blood everywhere. She suddenly felt faint and staggered across the room to sit down on one of the chairs until the awful sickly feeling and the pump of adrenaline finally began to subside.

"I once heard of something similar, though it's not been seen in living memory, to the best of my knowledge," said Rosalie, at length, recovering her composure. "It was an old pagan ritual once practised in Gothgoria, the idea being that if a wooden cross was driven through the heart of the deceased, it would prevent them from joining the ranks of the Undead. But a broken cross driven into the heart of someone still alive, as if in some unholy parody? That smacks of something altogether malevolent. And right here under our very noses, at *Foxholes*, the one place that should be safe for us ... this is doubly disturbing."

She got to her feet, went back over to the bed, and pulled the sheets up and over Gertrude's head.

"So where's the other lady, what's her name?" asked Conrad, his face still pale and drained of blood. He really did look as if he'd seen a ghost.

Rosalie shrugged and waved her arms in the air. "There's no sign of her here." Biting her nails with worry, she continued: "All I can suggest is that we go through the rooms on this floor methodically. And if we still don't find her, then we'll have to volunteer the rest of the staff and look farther afield. I don't think I have to tell you, of course, that this does not bode well, so be prepared for the worst."

Then: "But first things first. Conrad, if I can impose upon you, go find Inspector Jackson, tell him what's happened and bring him up here."

“Will do.” Conrad was out of the room in a dash.

They searched the first floor of the rambling building to no avail, and had to round up some of the other staff to search the ground floor, still without catching any sign nor report of the old lady's whereabouts.

“Oh, well. Let's check the grounds and the new annex, then,” suggested Dzoldzaya and they headed for the main foyer and outside.

“Hello,” the old lady cooed, as she sauntered up the drive way, heading toward the front doors.

Rosalie almost had a fit. “Oh, thanks heavens you're safe, Felicity Anne, we've been so worried.”

The old lady looked puzzled. “Well, yes, I can see that quite clearly.”

“Where have you been?”

“There's no great mystery. Didn't Gertie tell you? I went up to the secret garden to pay my respects to Sonam.”

“Sonam?” queried Rosalie.

“My master. Tenzing's predecessor.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a tizz this morning.”

“I can see from your faces that Gertie forgot to tell you I'd gone for an early morning constitutional, bless her. She's getting so forgetful these days. Old age creeping on, I suppose. It comes to us all eventually.”

Rosalie shook her head sadly. “Felicity Anne, I have some bad news to tell you.”

“Bad news?”

“I think we should go to my office and I'll explain everything to you when we're sitting down. Dzoldzaya? A cup of tea and some biscuits would be in order, I think, if you wouldn't mind. And then you'd better let Matron know what's happened. Get her to have a word with Inspector Jackson and together they can brief the rest of the staff. Oh, and spread the word that nobody is to go anywhere unaccompanied from now on – not even to the loo – nor leave the grounds, for their safety. And ...”

“And?”

“And I think the caretaker and groundsman should be armed. You'll find a spare revolver in one of Tenzing's drawers in his

office. The key's just under the front lip of the desk top on a hook.”

“Sure.” Dzoldzaya stood there for a few moments running through this barrage of requests in her mind, then turned on her heel and trotted up the steps and inside, heading for the cafeteria.

“Oh, my. This does sound like trouble with a capital 'T',” the old lady remarked. “I do hope my little jaunt hasn't caused you undue bother.”

Rosalie forced a smile, not looking forward to having to be the bearer of such bad tidings. “Not at all, Felicity Anne. You're a breath of fresh air here and a joy to have around. Now, let's go back inside.”

## 21. Change of plans

When Tenzing heard the insistent *thump-thump-thump* on the front door, he was up like a shot. Pulling on his dressing gown and slippers, he headed downstairs just as Helmech was unbolting the front door.

If this was the Hujardi militia, then they were done for.

A man, wearing the hat and bandanna of the Hujardi staggered into the hallway and sank down on a seat, trying to catch his breath.

"It's all right, Tenzing. This is Druz Kalim and he is a friend."

"What on earth is the matter?" Helmech asked after fetching the man some water.

"The Hujardi have a spy, an officer in the Lamasery Guard. He found out that your son, Kochees, had made an escape and that you are harbouring him."

"Damn them all!" Helmech cursed. "There's no time to waste, we must get Kochees away from here."

"You have a little time," Druz told them. "The clan chieftain, Bardo, has not yet been informed."

"Can the message be intercepted?"

Druz shook his head sadly. "Not without compromising the operation."

"The operation?" Tenzing queried.

"Infiltrating friends into the Hujardi's ranks."

"And how much time do we have?"

Druz looked at his watch. "I would say two hours at most. You really need to be out of the city within the hour."

"Why did you look at your watch?" asked Tenzing.

Druz shook his head from side to side and held his hands out apologetically. "Because I am the one who has to deliver that message to Bardo ...."

Helmech patted him gently on the shoulder. "It's all right my friend. I understand that you must do what you have to do."

Then: "Tenzing, wake the others and get them ready. I'll show you the way out through the garden, so that you're able to

leave unseen.”

Ten minutes later, they were all gathered downstairs in the room leading out to the verandah. There had been no time to wash nor prepare for the journey, but the only things that mattered really were to allow Kochees and his family to say their fond farewells and get safely out of the city. Fortunately for them, Gilgamar had no telephone system, so there was no fear of the Hujardi phoning ahead and stopping them at the border.

Young Kochees was reluctant to leave, clinging to his mother's dressing gown, but Miriam seemed to have taken him under her wing and gently coaxed him along as they followed Helmech out through the gate at the bottom of the garden.

“Take the first turning to the left down the alleyway and that will bring you out into the old coach yard where you left your car,” Helmech advised them, giving his son one last hug. “Godspeed.”

Then, wishing one-another well, they set off.

## 22. The briefing

Rosalie called a meeting later that day. She'd been round the college and managed to locate the others, though she hadn't managed to find the inspector. But she needn't have worried because she found him already in the office patiently waiting to have a word with her.

Inspector Jackson, Matron, Seth Longbottom the groundsman, Louis Barker the caretaker, Conrad, Dzoldzaya and Dave were in attendance. Meanwhile, Louis's young assistant Brian was out patrolling the grounds and the other staff were stationed in the main building and new annex.

“So, what do we know so far, Inspector?” asked Rosalie when they'd settled themselves down.

Jackson raised his arms apologetically. “Almost certainly that the assailant was a man, and probably a fairly strong man. The cross – which was sharpened at one end – was driven in with considerable force, breaking one of the ribs, perhaps like a knife or perhaps with the aid of a mallet.”

Dzoldzaya grimaced.

“When did it happen?”

“Well, I'm no pathologist, but it must have been between the time Miss Fotherhugh went off on her walk – around seven – and when you found Gertrude around eight thirty.”

Rosalie did think that a trained monkey could have told her that much, but she bit her lip. “Any clues?”

“The stake was polished wood and I was hoping to be able to lift fingerprints – I always carry a spare kit in the boot of my car – but I found none, suggesting that the assailant wore gloves, and the door knob was also suspiciously clear, suggesting that it had been wiped clean. There were no other clues, unfortunately: some bruising to the arms, legs and face around the mouth suggesting a bit of a struggle and the use of restraint, but no skin behind the fingernails or traces of fabric. Nothing like that, more's the pity.”

The inspector seems to like the word “suggesting”, rather suggesting that he hadn't much of a clue as yet, Dzoldzaya mused.

“So what now?” Rosalie asked, sensing Dzoldzaya's own

reaction. If the situation were not so tragic, then it would indeed be comedic.

“Well, with so many students here, I've raided your stationery and organized the staff to take statements from their pupils; and I shall also require statements from your staff and from the recent visitors. And I think we should take everybody's fingerprints for future reference.”

“What kind of detail?”

“That reminds me of the joke: the sergeant major bellows 'Jump!' to the raw recruit who merely stands unmoved and asks 'Why?' And the sergeant major snarls at him, 'When I ask you to jump, laddie boy, the correct answer is “How high?”' I want to know every minuscule detail starting with the first arrival of your guests yesterday to lunchtime today.”

Dzoldzaya wasn't quite sure how that joke related to the taking of statements, but who knew what went on in the inspector's labyrinthine mind?

“And do you think that will bear fruit?”

The inspector shrugged. “You never know with these things. Sometimes even the most insignificant sounding remark made merely in passing can crack the most baffling case. It's all about making connections. And, yes, often we simply draw a blank. But it's always worth a try.”

“One thing I do know is that there was an awful lot of blood. The assailant's clothes must surely have been splattered or stained. So I'm interested in finding those clothes and also interested in any recent changes of clothes. Again, though, I don't think the assailant is a fool, so I'm not holding my breath for a positive result in that regard.”

“What about suspects? Or a motive?”

“Well, we can't afford to rule anyone out at this stage, except the old lady, um ...” The inspector flicked through his notebook.

“Miss Felicity Anne Fotherhugh,” Rosalie prompted him.

“Yes, the Fotherhugh woman, and perhaps our limp-wristed friend. Given the fact that deaths have occurred in the city, it's possible that we might be dealing with two or more perpetrators here with some kind of grudge against or opposition to the Network. One or more is either currently resident here or has found some means of access. Who knows? It could be an ex-



employee who hung on to an old master key? Or someone able to shin up drainpipes and climb in through windows. I have no idea at this stage. It's highly improbable that the culprit is one of the younger pupils; but the staff, ourselves included; the adult students, and even the recent guests, all remain very much in the frame."

Just then, as Rosalie was unscrewing a little bottle of lemonade and pouring it into her glass, there was a knock at the door and Albert Worthy, one of the guests, poked his head around the door.

"Sorry to bother you, but we seem to have run out of toilet paper in the gents ....

At that moment, they heard a distant scream and they leapt to their feet. As for Albert, being hard of hearing and thinking that this was a reaction to his request, he looked utterly bemused. "There's no rush ...."

Rosalie thrust the glass of lemonade into the old man's hand. "Albert, sit yourself down, have a drink, and stay there, there's a good chap," she advised him, making a dash for the office door.

## 23. The journey north

Things were pretty tense as Tenzing drove through the quiet streets of the city. It was still very early in the morning and he was in two minds: whether to park up and wait until later to leave, which would attract less attention, or to leave immediately and bluff their way through with talk of visiting a relative's funeral or some such.

“What do you think?” he asked them.

The others were non-committal, merely shrugging and telling him that they'd leave that decision up to him, but then young Kochees spoke up. “Fortune favours the bold,” he suggested without hesitation, and so that's what they settled on, spending a minute or two getting their stories sorted before Tenzing set off again for the road north out of the city.

In the event, they needn't have worried. There were some of the Hujardi militia standing by the roadside, but they were pretty lacklustre and after briefly talking to Tenzing and a cursory look at the occupants, the car was waved through.

“That was a good call, Kochees, thank you,” nodded Tenzing, peering at the lad through the rear-view mirror as they drove away and headed across the wide plain.

They travelled in near silence for some time, but by the time they reached the edge of the plain and began to climb into the hills, they began to loosen up, though Kochees still seemed quite subdued, which was only to be expected, really.

As they approached a vantage point, Tenzing pulled the car into the side of the road and got out. “Would you like to come and have a last look at the temple-city?” he asked Kochees, going round the other side of the car and opening the door. The lad clambered out and Miriam followed, to stand by his side.

They stood there for some time, drinking in the fresh country air and admiring the view. The sun was up now and its rays were reflecting off the golden domes and spires, making the temple-city look so radiant and full of life.

Then the tears began to flow down Kochees's cheeks. Miriam put her arm around the lad and he buried his head in her bosom,

sobbing. Tenzing allowed them this private and cathartic moment, then slowly made his way back to the car.

“And that was also a good call, thank you, Tenzing,” Miriam whispered as she climbed into the car.

Indeed, though he was still rather quiet in their company, Kochees did seem to perk up somewhat as they day went on, and he was clearly taken by Miriam and she by him, which was a good thing and a joy to behold.

They travelled on through the lowland hills without a break and had no option but to pass through Miriam's village. She couldn't bear to look and ducked down out of sight until they were through the other side. Tenzing spotted her old wooden house, now utterly consumed by the fire and no more than a heap of blackened beams and ashes, from which there would be nothing left to salvage.

As he drove on, Tenzing noticed the flashing headlights in his rear-view mirror and for a few moments they all feared the worst. Behind them were a number of pickup trucks, full to overflowing with heavily armed Hujardi militia. He pulled the car into the side of the road and waited for the trucks to pull up, but instead they drove on, a whole convoy of battered vehicles. So, waiting until they had passed and maintaining a discreet distance from them, he set off once again. They followed the convoy for many miles until finally the trucks turned off the road and took a rough track heading north.

“Well, that's a blessing,” observed Helen, breathing a sigh of relief.

Tenzing shook his head. “For us perhaps, but not for my people.”

“Why's that?”

“Because that road north leads toward Narayana, my homeland, and it would appear that the cancerous growth of fanaticism is rapidly spreading.”

Eventually they arrived once more at the tiny hamlet nestling in the valley on the edge of the moors, and stopped outside the guest house they'd stayed at on their outward journey. The landlady appeared pleased enough to see them again and went out of her way to make them feel at home. They'd missed lunch that day and their stomachs were rumbling, but they'd arrived in time

for tea and a chance to once again fill their bellies.

There were only two rooms free at the guest house, so they decided that Miriam would share with Helen in the smaller of the two rooms whilst he, Randal and young Kochees would share the other. It was only for the one night, so it wasn't that much of an issue.

It looked like they'd been out hunting again, for the only thing on the menu (not that there actually was a menu to choose from) was game stew and dumplings, with jam rollie pollie and custard for dessert, but with the exception of a few moans from Kochees who was a little perturbed by all the bones, they were satisfied enough with that. As for the rollie pollie, which was something Kochees had not even dreamed of, let alone tasted before, he wolfed that down and enquired if there was more. Tenzing had a word with the landlady and she happily refilled the lad's bowl. The lad scraped the bowl clean.

Kochees did enquire whether there might be thirds, and Helen had opened her mouth to chide him, but fortunately Miriam persuaded the lad more gently that you could have too much of a good thing and that it might upset his stomach, and also that to ask for thirds was rather greedy and impolite.

Tenzing laughed. "That reminds me of the time a friend came to stay in Narayana. Being well brought-up and taught not to waste food, she cleaned her plate. Whereupon her host, being brought up to be hospitable, served her more food, thinking that she must still be hungry. And again she cleaned her plate."

"This went on for some time until I intervened, explaining that in her culture it was considered polite to eat all the food offered, to show that it is appreciated; whereas in our culture, if a guest ate all that was served it meant that he still had room for more. In that culture, the thing to do to signal that you have been satisfied, equally courteously, was to leave a little food on the side of one's plate."

## 24. Panic stations

Rosalie and the others were out of the office in a flash and stood in the corridor casting their eyes this way and that.

“I think the scream came from down there,” one of the young girls called out to them, pointing behind her and running down the corridor toward them.

They trotted after the inspector as he ran off, throwing each door wide and scanning inside as he went. He came to the loos and dashed inside, kicking each of the cubicle doors open, then emerged to try the next door, the ladies, pushing that door open and repeating the process. One of the cubicle doors was closed and he peered underneath. He could see two bare legs and a pair of frilly drawers.

“Sorry, 'scuse me, ma'am,” he apologized. “You all right in there?”

“Well, I must say that I *was*, until you came barging in, young man. I take it that's you, Inspector? What on earth is all the commotion?”

The inspector recognized the voice. “My apologies, Miss Fothergay.”

“Miss Fotherhugh,” she corrected.

“Miss Fotherhugh. We heard a scream.”

“Well, it didn't emanate from in here, I can assure you,” the old lady insisted.

“My apologies again, ma'am,” the inspector replied and hastily left the ladies to resume the search.

Just then, Leslie Stockley came trotting down the corridor from the direction of the front door. He was wearing a jogging suit in a fetching shade of puffy pink and matching trainers and had his buddie Clement Wilkins in tow, huffing and puffing away like a sixty-a-day man. Wilkins was no longer in what you might call the peak of physical fitness, though given his size and weight, he'd probably still put up a good fight.

“Something the matter?” asked Stockley, pulling up beside them. “One of the cherubim told me she'd heard a scream.”

“You didn't hear anything outside?”

“Not a dickie bird,” Stockley replied, “though I was singing away to myself to set the pace, so I might not have noticed.”

*“I don't know what I bin told, Hope to die, 'fore I grow old,”* Stockley chanted, still jogging on the spot, in perfect mimicry of an enlisted man at a military training camp.

That man was as much use as a chocolate fire guard. “Thank you, Leslie. Right, I suggest we continue the search.”

Search as they might, they could not trace the origins of the scream and, counting heads as they went along and realizing that everyone had been accounted for, they abandoned the search and returned to Rosalie's office.

“Oh, Albert, are you still here after all this time? I'm so sorry,” Rosalie laughed as she went to sit down beside him. “And I promise we'll sort out with some loo rolls.”

Albert made no reply.

“Albert?”

The old man sat there, staring out of the window of the office. She waved a hand in front of his face. Still he made no reaction. And when she took hold of his hand to feel for a pulse, the old man began to slump forward. The inspector caught him before he hit the floor and, with Conrad's help, they laid him out on the settee under the window. The inspector examined the old man, but could see no obvious marks on him. Then he noticed the half empty glass on the low table just in front of the seat where Rosalie had left him.

“Was that glass there when we left?” he asked.

“It was my lemonade,” Rosalie explained. “I'd just poured it out when I heard the scream, so I just thrust the glass into Albert's hand and advised him to sit down, have a drink and stay here till we got back.”

The inspector took out a handkerchief and carefully raised the glass to his face to sniff it. Then he dipped his finger in and licked it.

“Do you have the bottle?”

Rosalie fished the empty bottle out of the waste-paper basket and passed it to the inspector.

“Poison?” she asked, suddenly realizing what it was all about.

“That's my guess, yes.”

He picked up the glass with the handkerchief and carefully emptied the contents into the bottle, screwed the lid on, then pocketed it. Then he pulled out an evidence bag from his jacket pocket, slipped the glass in and sealed the bag.

“Where did you get the drink?” he asked Rosalie.

“From the cafeteria yesterday. I put it in my fridge yesterday afternoon. When the weather's hot, I much prefer a cold drink.” Then: “You mean the poison was meant for me?”

“That would make sense, yes,” he nodded.

“But I feel so awful ....”

“You weren't to know, Rosalie. It's not your fault.”

“Oh, tell you what, I still haven't got everyone's fingerprints, so I need to get your prints, and this chap's,” he continued. “You carry on with your business and I'll go root out my kit from the car. Once I've got the prints, I suggest you lock up this office for now. I need to pop into the city for a while to chat up a young lady who works at the police forensics lab and confirm whether or not the drink was poisoned. Then when I get back I'll have to give the body and the room a more thorough going over. And finally, when that's done and dusted, you can do what you have to do with the old chap and have your office back, okay?”

They nodded solemnly and the inspector went out to his car.

## 25. The border

The weary wayfarers headed out of the valley and across the open moorland early the next morning. With no identification cards and travel permits for Miriam and Kochees and no room in the boot for all the luggage, there was no way he could get them across the border directly unless he claimed diplomatic immunity, and this was something that the authorities frowned upon. It also took an age for the border guards to obtain the necessary authorization from the bureaucrats at Sher Point.

Before they came to the forest and out of sight of the border post, Tenzing pulled the car into the side of the road and turned to the others.

“What's up?” Randal wanted to know.

“I'm just weighing up how we're going to get over the border,” Tenzing told him. “The question is, who's going to drive us through?”

He was met by a mass shaking of heads, as neither Randal nor Helen felt confident enough to take the risk. though Kochees did pipe up: “I've been watching you, Mister Rinchen, and I think I could learn.”

Tenzing reached over and tussled the lad's hair. “Another day, Kochees, another day, I promise.”

Tenzing was lost in thought for a time, then he came to a decision. “Okay, I'll have to drive across the border with Helen, and Miriam and Kochees will have to go off on a ramble. “Randal, if I'm driving, then you need to go with them.” He explained the situation and, taking out a notepad, he sketched out the intended route which bypassed the border post a few hundred yards ahead of them.

That agreed, Tenzing got out of the car and rummaged around in his tool kit in the boot. “You'll need these,” he said, producing a pair of heavy duty wire cutters.

He fished in his pocket and produced a white paper bag. “And these. But don't eat them all now, save some for Kochees.”

Randal didn't quite follow, but took the bag anyway. Peering inside he saw it was full of sweets.



“Well, I guess I could always try bribing the guards if we get caught,” he laughed, pocketing the sweets.

“There's another option, of course Randal, and that's that I get Miriam and Kochees past the border and come back for you and Helen.”

“No, I'm fit enough and game, Tenzing.”

“Okay, see you in a few minutes, then.” Tenzing looked at his watch. “I'll wait here with Helen until the top of the hour. If you can't get through, come back here and we'll have to figure out something else.”

Randal set out with Miriam and Kochees, climbing over a low wooden fence and entering the trees on the edge of the forest. There was no path here and he had to keep looking back to make sure that they were heading in the right general direction and looking ahead to find some object that he could use as a reference point and aiming toward that. It would be so easy for them to end up going around in circles and becoming lost.

After a hundred yards or so, they came across a trail through the forest, just as Tenzing had indicated on the sketch he'd drawn, so they were pretty close to the mark after all. Quite why Tenzing indicated that they should follow that path, which led them so far away from their intended destination, and hadn't suggested a more direct route, Randal couldn't fathom, but he steered the others down the path anyway.

As they walked through the trees Randal caught sight of the fence ahead. They were still heading away from the road and approaching the fence at an oblique angle. As this point the narrow trail veered off to the left and here they headed directly toward the fence.

Rummaging in his pocket he found the wire cutters and also the bag of sweets, offering the sweets around. Miriam accepted gladly, but Kochees shook his head. He was a strange lad. Or maybe Lamas weren't allowed to eat confectionery?

“Are you sure?” he asked again. “We don't have any rules against eating sweets, you know. And they're really very moreish.”

Again Kochees shook his head, then abruptly changed his mind and took one.

Randal took up the cutters and made a start on the fence. The

wire was tougher than it looked, taking a few attempts to cut through each of the multi stranded cables, and by the time he'd made a hole big enough for them to crawl through, he had worked up quite a sweat and had blistered the palm of his hand. He held the fence open whilst Miriam and Kochees slithered through, then followed, bending the fence back into place when he was done, so that from a distance it would still appear intact. Sooner or later, the gap would be spotted, so they wouldn't be able to use this means of entry on another occasion.

Over the far side of the fence, Randal noticed a single wire stretched out across the ground and for a few moments he was at a loss as to what purpose it might serve. And then, catching sight of the dog sprinting toward him, it suddenly hit him. There was no way that they could get past the wire before the dog was on them and it looked like the leash it was on, which was attached to the wire by a large metal ring, was long enough to reach the fence.

In that moment, it suddenly dawned on him what the bag of sweets might be for. Hurriedly rooting around in his pocket, he fished in the bag and took out a handful of the sweets. As the dog dashed on, he cast the sweets over the ground near the wire, hoping to God that the snarling dog would be more interested in the treat than in digging its fangs into their tasty flesh.

The dog did indeed wolf the sweets down, but before the three of them had reached the wire, the sweets were gone and the dog was once again baring its teeth and snarling at them.

Randal fished in his pocket and cast one or two of the sweets near the dog, then cast a few further away, hoping that the animal would go after them and that they might grab that opportunity and sprint across the wire.

The dog lapped up the two sweets that were close at hand, but did not venture further, apparently content to leave those for dessert, after tackling the main course ... them.

"May I have some of those sweets?" asked Kochees, letting go of Miriam's hand and coming close.

"Kochees, not now, for heaven's sake. There are more important things to worry about."

Undaunted, Kochees held out his hand.

What the hell. Randal pulled what was left of the bag of

sweets from his pocket and tossed it in the boy's direction, then took out the wire cutters, weighing them in his hand and wondering whether he might attack the dog himself.

Kochees took out one of the sweets and, holding it in his open palm, he calmly walked straight toward the dog, humming quietly to himself.

The dog pricked up its ears and sniffed around, and when Kochees tossed the sweet in the dog's direction, it caught it in mid air.

The lad went closer still, circling round until he was beyond the wire. Then, pulling out another sweet, he sat down in the grass cross-legged, holding out the sweet in the open palm of his hand and still humming away. The dog had stopped snarling by now and, keeping low, it slowly crept closer, sniffing the air. Finally it came so close that it was almost touching Kochees. The lad gradually lowered his hand and the dog, too, lay down and gently took the sweet from his outstretched hand.

"You may cross the wire now," Kochees told them quietly, whilst he had the dog's full attention. Randal took his word for it and slowly walked forward, holding Miriam's hand, until they were well clear of the dog.

Finally, Kochees tipped out the remaining sweets and, patting the contented dog on the head, he slowly got up and followed Randal and Miriam, still humming softly as he went.

"Kochees, you're a treasure," beamed Randal as the lad approached and they went on their way. "Thank you."

"I think that's why Mister Rinchen suggested you save some of the sweets for me," Kochees replied.

The lad probably wasn't far wrong there.

Randal consulted the map and looked around for the stream that Tenzing had indicated. Walking on for a further hundred yards or so, Tenzing's sense of scale being perhaps a little awry, they finally came across it, and following the course of the stream, they found their way back to the road where the stream disappeared into a pipe to cross under the road. And there, waiting for them out of sight of the border post were Tenzing and Helen.

"Well done," Tenzing smiled, opening the door for them and climbing back in the car.

“We need to thank young Kochees here,” Randal told Tenzing. “He's the one who found a way past the dog.”

“Excellent,” Tenzing agreed. “And, before I forget: Miriam and Kochees, welcome to the Freelands.”

He went into the glove compartment where he kept his gun and brought out a silver hip flash, passing it to Helen who now sat beside him in the front of the car. “I think this an occasion to celebrate, don't you?”

When it came to Kochees's turn, the lad politely refused.

“The Lamas don't drink,” Miriam explained.

“Ah, but this isn't your ordinary, everyday drink, Kochees. This is *chungari*.”

“What's *chungari*?” the lad asked, opening the flash and sniffing the contents.

“It means herb of enlightenment,” Tenzing told him as they set off down the road through the forest.

Kochees took a sip, and a second, then passed the flask to Randal, grimacing and shaking his head as the potent elixir hit the back of his throat. “I've tasted something like that before, but not in an alcoholic drink,” he told Tenzing. “The High Lamas sometimes use it in a drink like lemonade and sometimes in their cooking. It's highly prized.” He went on to describe the plant and its flower in detail, revealing that the Lamas called it *ganshee*.

Tenzing nodded in appreciation. “Yes, yes, Kochees. What you call *ganshee*, we call *chungari*. They are one and the same.”

## 26. The special reserve

By now, word had swept through *Foxholes* about the latest murder and there was bedlam. Rosalie was taking flak not only from the remaining guests but also from the older and mature students.

There was only one thing for it now. She found the key, went into Tenzing's office with the other staff and opened the old safe.

"Louis, would you mind giving me a hand with this box?" she asked the caretaker.

He bent down and heaved out an old iron box and took it across to Tenzing's desk, putting it down gently on a chair rather than risk scratching the antique rosewood desk top.

One by one Rosalie took out the old service revolvers, which they held as a last resort for just this kind of emergency, and passed them around.

Louis handed out ammunition and gave the staff rudimentary instructions. "Pay careful attention now, unless you want to blow your balls off when you pull the gun from your pocket. *This* is the safety catch ...."

When Louis was done, Rosalie called for their attention. "From now on, I want you to stick to the guests like glue. Tonight, we'll take it in turns to patrol the landings upstairs. I'll draw up a rota and take the first turn with Conrad. Working in pairs, we'll each spend an hour on guard. Since there aren't enough guns to go around, when you're done, go and wake your replacements and make sure they have at least one of the guns between them."

"Morris, you have some whistles for gym and games: you might share those around, too. If you don't have a gun, make sure you take a whistle, and swap those around, too. At the slightest sign of anything untoward, blow the thing as loud as you can and keep blowing until help arrives. And whenever anybody needs to leave their room and go to the loo, make sure they're accompanied – even if that means waking a third person up."

"Also, when you leave here, make sure that the guests and students know the drill and are aware that we're taking these

precautions. That should help settle the growing unrest. The last thing we need now is panic and folk scattering to the hills.”

## 27. A home away from home

Had Rosalie Muller been with him, then in view of the urgency of recent events and the need to get back to base camp, the travellers might have shared the driving and continued through the night. But Tenzing decided instead to break their return journey again as the sun began to set, stopping in a market town on the south downs, before continuing on up north to Sher Point.

Young Kochees was so excited by the novel sights and sounds and by the intensity of their company, and had tossed and turned in his sleep that night. Now, on the final leg of their journey, lulled by the gentle rocking of the car's soft suspension, he had finally fallen into a blissful sleep with his head nestling in Miriam's lap. He finally roused himself, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, as Tenzing negotiated the vehicle through the bustling streets of Sher Point and headed back out of the city toward the centre, *Foxholes*.

Tenzing did offer to drop off Randal and Helen *en route*, but they decided that they'd rather go with him to the centre, help Miriam and Kochees settle in and stay the night, then return to their flat the next day, which suited him fine. That way he'd be able to spend more time with Rosalie Muller and Harold Grainger, his deputies, and more fully brief them; assuming that Harold had completed his work and returned to Sher Point by now. They had a lot of work ahead of them, both the extraordinary business which had to be conducted as a matter of urgency and also a whole heap of routine paperwork that he'd postponed before going away.

It was around eleven when they arrived and as he drove his car up to the front of the main building, Rosalie came dashing down the steps to meet him. As soon as he saw the worried look on Rosalie's face, he knew something was seriously wrong, and she began to explain about the murders.

"It's okay, Rosalie. You don't have to spit out the whole story in one breath. Let's stay calm. Get someone to make sure our new friends Miriam and Kochees are settled in, then let's get you out

of *Foxholes* for a few minutes so you can have a breather. There are other even more urgent matters to attend to and I was going to convene a formal extraordinary meeting, but instead let's all have lunch at *The Wayfarer's Rest* up the road. We'll take Miriam and Kochees along, too."

Randal was already there when the party arrived. One of the first things he'd done on arriving back was to go in search of a fresh supply of tobacco, since he'd been gagging for a cigarette since the first day he entered Gilgamar and had his stash confiscated. Randal's old friend Dave was there, too, which was a pleasant surprise. Since there were seven of them that day, including Rosalie and Harold, they'd thoughtfully found a space in a snug overlooking the rear garden and pulled two tables together so that they could all sit as one.

Following protocol they ate first and made light chit-chat, then when the tables had been cleared and a fresh round of drinks brought in, they turned to other matters. Top of the agenda were the murders and it took Rosalie some time to put Tenzing in the picture.

"So what do you think, Tenzing?" Rosalie asked, her hands clasped to her chest in anxious anticipation.

"Well firstly, Rosalie, I don't think you've done anything that I wouldn't have done myself. Thank you so much. Under normal circumstances I'd load up the old service revolver and muck in, but something even more urgent and important has come up and, in view of what's been happening, I'm in the most awful dilemma: caught between a proverbial rock and a hard place. You see I'm needed elsewhere and my hands are tied."

"What about Harold?"

"I had to send him off on an errand."

"And will he be coming back soon?"

Tenzing waved his hands in the air in an expression of apology and despair. "Oh, Rosalie, Rosalie. Would that we could. Like me, Harold is needed elsewhere. We have orders from On High and this couldn't have happened at a worse time. I have to go away again, and if Harold comes with me then we can share the driving and return that much sooner."

Tenzing sighed deeply and was silent for a time, as if weighing up matters in his mind, clearly troubled and emotionally



torn. Finally he spoke again. "Listen, I think we should return to the college and we'll meet in my study."

Since some of what they had to discuss might offend the ears of Miriam and Kochees, after that drink they all strolled back down the hill toward the centre and Tenzing had one of the students show Miriam and Kochees around the centre and keep them entertained whilst the others convened a more formal meeting in his study.

"Much as I am loath to have to do this, the first and only item on the agenda, ladies and gentlemen, is the worsening situation in Gilgamar, or more generally speaking the spread of Hujardi militancy," Tenzing began when they were all assembled. "It's already endemic in Erigwid, its place of origin, and has since spread in ever growing numbers, both in terms of insurgents and converts, throughout Gilgamar where it is a great threat both to the civil liberties of the population at large and also the Lamaist theocracy in particular."

"As you well know, the theocracy itself and ancillary work is becoming increasingly corrupt and it has to be admitted that Gilgamar is as impoverished as ever, and something has to be done to drag the country into the modern, democratic age. But the answer to that is certainly not to allow the Hujardi militia to seize control, far from it. They would only plunge the country back yet further into the feudal rule of the Dark Ages, as Miriam rightly pointed out to me on our travels."

"What's even more worrying is that the militant insurgency appears to be spreading further afield," he told them, going on to mention the armed convoy they'd seen heading up north toward Narayana. "It would be catastrophic, not least to the tradition, if the Hujardi were to get a foothold in, or a stranglehold on, our homeland."

"The people of Erigwid were always such wonderfully noble, amiable, tolerant, talented, welcoming and hospitable folk. But this new breed of fanatics trample over delicacy, sensitivity and refinement. They spit in the face of moderation (and modernity) and all the goodness that their forbears spent centuries diligently and carefully and lovingly building up and against such apparently overwhelming odds."

"The culture that was to become so famed for its profound

humanity, its immense treasury of learning, its paradisaal gardens and its grand architecture hung onto life for so many long years with no more secure a purchase on life than a mountain flower clinging to a crevice in a sheer rock face, or an oasis in a desert. And now a gargantuan monster rears up, threatening to rock the very foundations of our own frail societies.”

“Now, perhaps you can appreciate why I am feeling so torn between the grave concerns at *Foxholes* and the even more dire concerns about events elsewhere. As I said, I have my orders from On High.”

Rosalie nodded. “Yes, I heard word from one of the radio amateurs in Narayana that insurgents had entered the border towns to the south and were massing there. Worse still, one of the schools which the Network funded and set up has been burnt to the ground. I hadn't mentioned this here at *Foxholes* because we already have so much on our plates without adding to the worries and misery.”

“So it begins,” Tenzing said, shaking his head sadly and peering off into the distance. “The bottom line is that action must be taken to halt this fanatical movement – and quickly – before it fully takes root. There is no sane alternative option. We're faced with a very tough decision here, one that will for a time increase the suffering of the people in places such as Gilgamar; one that will cost us some of our friendships and gain us new enemies.”

“How can you halt such a movement? It's gathered so much momentum,” queried Randal.

“On our own, we can't,” Tenzing replied, “and by 'we' I mean the Network, the tradition, the tribal peoples – whatever force we might put together.”

“What about the Freelanders?”

Tenzing shook his head. “Sickened by two prior wars, though ultimately victorious, they want no part of it.”

“Then who, and how?”

“There is one force that undoubtedly has the manpower, the resources and the motivation to crush the fanatics, and that is Nur Galan, which lies to the east of Gilgamar.”

“You mean the Collectivist Republic of Nur Galan,” Dave corrected, screwing up his face at the prospect and lighting up another cigarette.

“Indeed.”

“That sounds dangerous to me,” Dave commented, blowing out a blue-grey smoke ring. “I can see now why you didn't bring this matter up in Miriam and Kochees's hearing.”

“It is very risky. Nur Galan has a voracious appetite for natural resources and has expansionist plans. It could be that having taken and annexed Gilgamar that it would not stop there. But as I said before, I can't see any other sane options. And one thing of which we could be certain is that Nur Galan would indeed drag Gilgamar into the modern age.”

“Kicking and screaming, I'd say, and at great cost.”

“Birth can be very traumatic, David, and sometimes it's inextricably linked with death; but I know of no other alternative to the process, if there is to be new life.”

“Tenzing, who's to say that the modern way of unsustainable progress is inherently better?”

“In the short to medium term, yes, but it has been forecast by the Friends that even mighty Collectivist empires like Nur Galan will eventually crumble and turn toward democracy. They do not hold out such hopes for the Hujardi militia, if anything they fear the reverse. So, in the kind of time frame that the friends work in, this could be seen as a nothing more than a transitional period. Yes, the transitional can be a time of great upheaval, a great churning of the earth and a time of fresh planting.

“And another thing, David. The Hujardi militants are not getting their weaponry from the tooth fairy. They have many friends in high places in Erigwid and it could be that what we are witnessing is the birth of a wholly new phenomenon, which we might term *terror-ism*, perhaps even 'state sponsored terrorism.’”

“Are you certain about the Freelanders reluctance? Wouldn't it be altogether better if they were to take the lead?”

“I and others have tested the waters, David, and the powers that be are simply not interested at this moment in time, especially given the continuing poor economic climate. They're still reeling from the massive expense of the two Great Wars – the loss of life, the trauma, the colossal damage to the infrastructure, and also the great burden of debt incurred. Countless millions were poured into the war effort, but when it came to the time of restructuring and retooling industry, and rebuilding, the coffers

were empty. And for those aggressor countries faced with the double burden of paying crippling reparations as well as rebuilding, the fate of the common people has been far worse.

“Of course that attitude may well change in the future, when the insurgents are forcing their way past our own borders and infiltrating society, but we need action now. The future is simply not soon enough to meet our needs.”

## 28. Temporary relief

They managed to get through yet another long night, though almost everyone tossed and turned, unable to properly sleep; and when morning came, each turned up safely for breakfast in the cafeteria. Rosalie made sure of that, ticking them off her list one by one.

They saw little of Tenzing that morning. Harold Grainger had abruptly returned, and they were still no wiser as to where he'd been, and he was holed up in Tenzing's study. The study door was closed that day, which was most unusual, for Tenzing made a special point of keeping his door open to any and all who might care to enter, so the pair must be working on something of great importance, no doubt tied in with the problem of the Hujardi. Whatever, it was perhaps best not to disturb them.

That same morning, before break, Tenzing briefly popped his head into Rosalie's office and, with his profuse apologies, announced that he and Harold Grainger had to leave straight away.

"I swear to you, we'll be back as soon as humanly possible, Rosalie," Tenzing told her, taking hold of her arms and giving her an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

Without ceremony they set out on a journey once more. All Tenzing would tell Rosalie was that his first port of call would be *babs chu*, the remote community the tradition ran in the mountains to the north of his homeland, Narayana.

The morning went rather well, all things considered, with the new guests making the most of the many facilities *Foxholes* offered, though probably in a bid to take their minds off recent events. With Inspector Jackson still no closer to solving the murders and apprehending "persons or persons unknown", there was still a dark and ominous cloud hanging over the school. One of the inspector's favourite expressions was that someone or other – and more usually Leslie Stockley for whom the man had little time – was "about as much use as a chocolate fire guard". What the man was oblivious to was the possibility that this is what he was like himself and that he was merely projecting this failing on

others around him.

By afternoon, with the sun beating down fiercely, even with all the windows flung wide open it was becoming unbearably hot. Many of the guests have arrived in their suits and without more suitable clothing, so Rosalie had Ursula Grant, one of the gym masters, raid the cupboards, and offered shorts, running vests and open necked football shirts to the guests. There were some takers amongst the younger ones, but some of the more stiff and starched, and most notably the Galloping Major, would have none of it. He declined to even loosen his tie or unbutton his shirt collar, choosing to simply grin and bear it. As for dear old Felicity Anne Fotherhugh, she had got over the initial shock of her friend's death and was wearing a brave face that day, putting some of the others to shame. Equally notable and quite the opposite of the grumpy Galloping Major, she was only too happy to fly the flag and, with a defiant cry of "jolly hockey sticks!" she was one of the first to change out of her prim two-piece tweed suit and into games kit.

Come mid-afternoon, a few minutes before coffee, however, the peace was again shattered. Two loud gunshots rang out in quick succession from somewhere down the main corridor. Rosalie snatched up the old revolver from her desk and dashed out of the office, looking this way and that. Several of the others appeared now, the ones who were armed, at least, running up and down the corridor like headless chickens.

Just then, a figure came staggering out of the short passageway leading from Matron and Tenzing's offices. It was Inspector Jackson, his gun in his right hand down by his side and clutching at his right arm with his left hand.

Rosalie could see by the blood on his fingers that he'd been shot and she ran down the corridor to help. "Moira?" she called out to one of the girls who stood in stunned silence not far from the inspector, "Go get Matron. I believe she's in the laundry."

The girl stood there for a moment, as if frozen on the spot.

"Moira!" Rosalie requested again.

"Right." The girl suddenly broke free and dashed off in the direction of the kitchens. The laundry was in an adjacent extension.

"Inspector, let's go and sit in Matron's office until she arrives.

Are you badly hurt?"

The inspector gritted his teeth and shook his head. "Stings like buggery and looks worse than it is. I'm pretty sure it's just a flesh wound."

Several of the others were gathered around them now.

"We have to catch whoever did this," Rosalie insisted as she guided the inspector into Matron's office. "There, take a seat."

"Who was it?" asked Conrad, gun in hand.

The inspector helped Rosalie take his jacket off and clutched the wound to stem the flow of blood. "Don't worry," he replied at length. "I stiffed the creep."

"Where?"

"Tenzing's office. I caught him rummaging through the files."

The others left and headed down the corridor to the office to check for themselves just as Matron came bustling in. Quickly taking in the situation, she went over to her medical cabinet and set to work. "Don't worry, Inspector, we'll soon have you sorted out. Now, off with that shirt and let me have a closer look ....

"Good, good. Well, you'll be pleased to know that it's not half as bad as it looks. Just a graze, really, and what looks like powder burns. Now, hold still: this is going to sting a little ...

"Oh come, come Inspector, what are you, a man or a mouse?"



When Conrad saw Philip Rowbottom laid out on the floor of Tenzing's office beside the open filing cabinet, and the gun on the floor close-by, it came as quite a shock. With Tenzing, Harold Grainger and Rosalie keeping very much hidden away in the background, Rowbottom had been the front man for *Foxholes* for several years now, and Mister Congeniality as he was sometimes called was one of the last people whom Conrad would have suspected. But then that was the nature of spies: to seamlessly blend in with the scenery. He bent down to check Rowbottom's pulse. With a bullet through his chest and blood seeping from his mouth, and his eyes wide open and vacantly staring, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion.

## 29. An arduous journey

Not wishing to subject his deputy Rosalie Muller to the danger and ordeal in these uncertain times, not that she was in much less danger back at *Foxholes* by all accounts, Tenzing took Harold Grainger with him and they shared the driving so that they could make swifter progress on the long and arduous journey. Tenzing had drafted in David to take on some of Harold Grainger's teaching load, part time, and reshuffled and had distributed the rest amongst the other staff, so as not to further disrupt work at *Foxholes*. David was something of a rough diamond, of course, but he knew his stuff. With recent events and the suspension of teaching altogether, however, all that careful planning had been torn to shreds.

One of the reasons for going to Narayana was to see for himself to what extent the Hujardi were infiltrating the country and to speak with the king, to make sure that they were taking measures to tackle the militants. And, of course, he wanted Harold to spend some time with his students at *babs chu*, who'd been a little neglected of late. This would not slow his progress. Harold could do his thing at *babs chu* whilst he took care of the main task or "dreaded deed" as it might be better termed.

Tenzing didn't tell the others the ultimate purpose of his journey, because he knew that this would deeply worry them, though David was no fool and he certainly had an inkling. Leaving Harold to go on to *babs chu* and man the fort there, he returned to the capital and, as privately arranged with the king, he took several of the royal guard and a string of ponies and set out through the hills toward the east.

After several days travelling, they turned south out of Narayana to cross into Gilgamar, close to the eastern border with Nur Galan.

They neared one of the border towns as night fell, then left their ponies with one of the soldiers and went on foot, keeping to the trees and the shadows to pass undetected.

As arranged, they headed for a disused farmhouse which stood between the town and the border, not far from where the



Hujardi militia had set up camp. Approaching the farmhouse, Tenzing caught sight of the guide they were to meet and they sat together in the ruins whilst he explained the situation with the aid of a makeshift map.

The Hujardi were camped a few hundred yards this side of the border and opposite them on a small hill stood one of the Nur Galanese outposts. Both sides anxiously watched one another and tensions were running high, further heightened by the disinformation which had been spread in both countries about the others' intentions. The two sides were within rifle range, though as yet no shots had been exchanged.

Between the two, at the base of the hill and just inside Gilgamarn territory ran a stream, and that's where their guide was going to take them. Checking their rifles, the group set off, crouching low as they ran toward the stream, then wading along its shallow waters, until they were between the two opposing forces.

Four of the soldiers with Tenzing lay on the banks facing the outpost, awaiting Tenzing's command. All they were tasked with was to send a quick volley of shots at the superstructure of the outpost and over the heads of the guards. They were not to aim directly at the guards.

And over the other side of the stream, Tenzing and the remaining three soldiers had their rifles trained on the sentry standing outside one of the tents, watching the border, and the entrance to the tents from which the Hujardi would emerge. Again, they were to fire one quick volley. Any more than that and they risked the Hujardi spotting their muzzle flashes. If they could wound or kill any of the militia, then so much the better, but unless they must there was to be no second shot.

Yes, much as it grieved Tenzing, they were here to spark off a war.

At Tenzing's command, the men opened fire on the outpost and, as the sentry dived for cover and the militia ran from the tents in a state of panic, he and the other three soldiers fired.

As Tenzing's men hastily made their escape, all hell broke out. Keeping their heads down, they ran back up the stream as fast as they were able. Looking furtively about them to make sure they had not be seen, the soldiers got down on their bellies and

wormed their way across to the shelter of the trees. Keeping just inside the tree line, they ran back to where they'd left their ponies with the lone soldier. By the time they got there, the animals had been rested, fed and watered, and they quickly made good their escape into the hills with the Nur Galanese and the Hujardi thankfully none the wiser.

The group rode on into the early hours of the morning until they were certain that they were safe, then stopped for a rest and to eat some of the dried provisions they'd brought with them, before continuing on their way.

It took them several days to make it back to the capital where Harold Grainger was by now awaiting Tenzing's return, and by that time the news had come through that what was left of the Hujardi at the border town had now fled, following an attack by the Nur Galanese infantry, and that a column of armoured vehicles had been seen massing this side of the border. As Tenzing had hoped – and also dreaded – the battle had begun.

## 30. The return

By the time Tenzing and Harold Grainger finally returned to *Foxholes*, having unavoidably spent more time with the king on the way back from *babs chu*, news had arrived that the Nur Galanese had indeed invaded Gilgamar and with remarkable speed. Their armoured columns had not tackled the militia directly, but had bypassed many of the towns, as yet avoiding close urban combat.

Instead, as many of the population embarked on a panicked exodus, they split into three sections and it soon became clear why to observers. Apparently sure enough of their military superiority, one section remained to the east, near the border with Nur Galan. A second section headed west to effectively seal the border with the Freeland protectorate of Lilith – which controlled access to the Freelands in the west and Narayana to the north – whilst the third section headed south, to close the border with Erigwid.

In this way, the army put paid to the exodus and they also cut off the insurgents, so that they could neither flee the country nor be resupplied. And then, as their own numbers swelled, no doubt the Nur Galanese could begin the operation of gradually and methodically sweeping the country clean of the militia at their leisure. That was the plan, though in the event, the Hujardi were to put up the most fierce opposition and claim a great many Nur Galanese lives in a long and bloody series of campaigns.

Randal had mixed feelings about this turn of events and the possibility that it might actually have been deliberately orchestrated – which was a rumour doing the rounds at *Foxholes* – but, unlike Dave who was quite worked up about the whole affair, he could see that from the point of view of Narayana, at least, the threat from the Hujardi had been removed. The few militia who'd made it as far as Narayana wouldn't last long, and may already have fled or gone to regroup as news of the invasion broke.

But even this turn of events on the international stage was overshadowed by what had been happening at *Foxholes*. As soon

as they arrived back with Tenzing, Rosalie broke the latest news to him, and they immediately convened another meeting with the others in Tenzing's office. Rowbottom's body had already been removed days ago, but the patch of congealed blood on the precious carpet still remained.

They'd sealed off the room that day and waited and waited for Tenzing's return. Though there hadn't been another murder, for Rosalie and for the others the last weeks had been a living nightmare, not knowing if it was all over or where or when or even if someone might strike again. It was that not knowing, keeping them forever on edge, that was the hardest thing to handle.

Seeing that one of the filing cabinets was open, Tenzing had a quick scan through to see if anything had been disturbed. Noticing that one of the alphabetically sorted cards was out of sequence, he absent-mindedly put it back in place, then pushed the open drawer of the filing cabinet shut and invited them to take a seat.

"Right, Rosalie," he began, bringing the meeting to order. "I think perhaps you should bring me up to speed with recent events. And don't stint on the fine detail this time. Dzoldzaya? Perhaps you'd be good enough to have Cook rustle up some sandwiches and a pot of tea: we may be here for the long haul and Harold and I are famished after the journey."

They were there for an hour pouring out and then pouring over the details. Then, quite out of the blue, Tenzing said: "This evening, I think we'll hold a jolly soirée in the staff common room. I'd like all the staff and our guests to attend. Shall we say seven o'clock sharp? Rosalie, perhaps you'd have a word with Cook and see if she can provide us with a buffet?"

Seven o'clock sharp? That sounded rather precise. When making arrangements, Tenzing was usually so flexible, allowing much leeway by adding "-ish" to the time.

Tenzing fished in his pocket, brought out his wallet and thrust a wad of notes into the caretaker's hand. "Louis, you and your sidekick Brian take a ride up to *The Wayfarer's Rest* and buy in some bottled beer, wine and spirits, sufficient to get us all a little tipsy."

Rosalie looked a little puzzled at these arrangements, the idea

of fun and frivolity in such desperate times being the last thing on her mind, but having been with Tenzing for so long, she knew better than ask why.

And with that, Tenzing rose to his feet and pronounced the meeting adjourned.



At seven o'clock prompt, most of those who were to attend the impromptu soirée had arrived, though inevitably there were stragglers, and they were encouraged to make for the makeshift bar, manned by Louis and his young assistant Brian. As for the light buffet, that remained covered up and would be made available at nine o'clock to give their afternoon tea time to settle.

Just as Inspector Jackson entered the common room, he bumped straight into Clement Wilkins and would have gone flying had the hulk not reached out and steadied him. "Sorry, Inspector," Clement smiled through crooked teeth, patting him heavily on the shoulder.

"No bones broken," Leslie Stockley added, brushing him down.

"You should watch where you're going," Jackson huffed, pushing past the couple and heading for the bar, keen to put some distance between them.

By eight o'clock, after most of the guests had had their drinks topped-up, Tenzing strode out into the centre of the staff room and clapped his hands together, to attract their attention. "Friends, ladies and gentlemen, if I might prevail upon you for a few minutes. Due to lack of time and forethought, we haven't been able to arrange any entertainment for you this evening ..."

There were a few sad groans from the assembly.

"... However, I thought that we might nevertheless provide some entertainment ourselves."

Tenzing reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a list on a sheet of paper and strode over to one end of the room, just by the piano, positioning a couple of chairs opposite one another. "Very well, with that in mind, I would like to call Inspector Gerald Jackson. Inspector, if you'd care to step this way."

The inspector crossed the room and, at Tenzing's invitation, they shook hands.

“Please take a seat, Inspector.”

“What's this all about, Tenzing?” the man wanted to know.

Tenzing sat in the other seat and brought out a stack of filing cards from his pocket.

“I thought we might begin with a few basic questions ....”

“Oh. Right you are.”

“Very well. How old are you, Inspector?”

“Thirty seven,” the man replied without delay, though with a shrug of the shoulders, still not quite sure what this was all about.

“And your wife's name?”

“Deirdre. And it's ex-wife, by the way. Two decades of long shifts and missed engagements in the police force put paid to that.”

Tenzing asked two or three more questions in that vein. “Well, I can see you're finding these questions all too easy, Inspector, so let's move on to your specialist subject, shall we?”

Again the inspector shrugged. “If we must.”

“Name three types of fingerprint.”

The man paused for a moment. “Ooh, now let me see. Well, um, there's um ....”

“I'll have to hurry you.”

“I'm just joking, Tenzing. The three main types of fingerprint are the arch, the loop and the whorl. Whorls may be further subdivided into such patterns as the accidental, the peacock's eye, the ...”

“Yes, yes. Thank you Inspector, I can see you know your onions. Top marks. You may return to the bar. Louis, I think a shot of *chungari* for the inspector would be in order.”

“Friends, ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for Inspector Gerald Jackson who's been a fine contestant. Inspector, thank you again.”

Tenzing took a few sips of his drink and again consulted his list. “And now, if I may call upon the Reverend Timothy Bryce.”

The man strolled across the room, still clutching the Good Book in one hand and hastily pocketing his hip flask with the other. They shook hands and sat down, the minister sitting right on the edge of his seat and leaning forward anxiously.

“Tell me about the Council Of Waygone, your Reverence.”

“It was a meeting called by the founding fathers in 1083,” the

man replied without hesitation.

“Go on.”

“Well, folk travelled from as far afield as Gothgoria and the meeting was called to decide once and for all whether the Book of Ludwig was to be included in the Good Book – which was still being put together at that time – or whether it should be left out.”

“And the outcome?”

“It was deemed heretical by some, who went on to found the Orthodox Temple, and deemed genuine and valid by others who formed the Breakaway Temple.”

“Good, good. Now, one final question, your Reverence: would you be so good as to recite for me Chapter 3, Verse 18 of the Book of Ludwig?”

“Quite happily,” the minister laughed, “... if there *were* a verse 18, that is. That chapter contains only 17 verses.”

Tenzing shrugged his shoulders. “Well, it was worth a try. Thank you, your Reverence. Friends, ladies and gentlemen, a warm round of applause, if you please.”

“Randal,” Tenzing called across the room. “A third chair, if you please. And friends, if you want another drink, please feel free to have your glasses topped up.” So saying, the director went over to the bar and helped himself to a fresh glass of wine.

“Right, then,” the director smiled when the herd had been adequately watered, riffling through the filing cards until he found the right ones. “Clement Wilkins and Leslie Stockley? Come on now, don’t be shy, Clement. Please step this way.”

After shaking their hands, they sat down.

“So, tell me how you two came to meet, if you would.”

Clement and Leslie exchanged glances and Leslie, who was the more vocal of the two spoke up. “We met not long after I left school,” he said. “Clement was a strongman with a travelling circus and, being interested in show business from a very early age, I managed to hitch a lift. They had a space in one of the side shows, singing. And I also trained as a trapeze artist.”

“I see.” Tenzing signalled to Dzoldzaya and she came across carrying a heavy iron bar and gave it to Tenzing and he in turn passed it over to Clement Wilkins.

“Would you mind showing us how you bend an iron bar, please Clement?”

The big man stood up and weighed the object in his hand, but made no attempt to bend it.

“In your own time. Why not give it a go?”

The big man looked at Tenzing sheepishly.

“Please, give it a go. That's all I ask.”

Clement heaved at the metal bar with all his might, but it wouldn't bend even a fraction of an inch.

“Okay,” Tenzing nodded and reached out and took the iron bar from the man.

“So, tell me what just happened, if you would, Clement.”

Clement shrugged his shoulders apologetically. “It was all an illusion,” he admitted. “We'd produce a heavy iron bar and pass it around, betting gullible folk five to one if they could bend the bar, and of course they couldn't. So then with the help of some sleight of hand and misdirection, I'd pull another bar, made of a softer alloy, from up my sleeve, as it were, bend that, then swap that for a heavy bar we'd already bent in the blacksmith's forge while it was white hot. Then I'd pass that round and bet folk ten to one that they couldn't bend it back into shape. It was all a big con, really. I'll tell you what, though: there was a fellah one night, twice the size of me. He actually *did* bend the bar back into shape and scored a tenner off me. We had to bar the bugger after that, to stop him coming back and fleecing us for more.”

Tenzing nodded and smiled, then turned to the man's partner, Leslie. “And would you like to perform a turn for us this evening, Leslie?” Tenzing enquired.

Leslie nodded and he had folk clear a space in the centre of the common room. Without further ado, he went into a skilful acrobatic routine, albeit a little restrained due to the lack of space. He was also something of a contortionist, it seemed, and showed them how to hook your legs behind your head, walk on your hands and kiss your arse hello.

“Wonderful,” Tenzing applauded. “Thank you both so much.”

Then: “Help yourselves to a *chungari*, but don't go too far, Leslie. I have another treat in store, if you'll bear with me for a few more minutes.”

Tenzing turned back to the audience. “I have just a few more folk to call upon, but I thing it's high time that we had something



to eat, friends. So let's take a few minutes out.”

After twenty minutes or so most folk's plates were empty and their stomachs filled, so Tenzing again called them to attention. “Without further ado, friends, ladies and gentlemen, I call upon Derek Shecklewig.”

There was applause, but Derek did not come forward. Randal noticed him sidling away in the direction of the door and made a bee-line to redirect him back into the room.

“Come, come, don't be shy, Derek.” Tenzing motioned toward the vacant chair and shook hands with the man as he edged closer.

“I gather you were something of a prodigy,” Tenzing began as the man took a seat. “And now you're a noted mathematician and accomplished pianist, am I right?”

Derek nodded nervously and sat there fidgeting. Then he decided to sit on his hands to bring them under control.

“I'm sorry to have to put you through this, Derek,” Tenzing said. He put up his hand to attract Dzoldzaya's attention. “I think perhaps a large shot of *chungari* wouldn't go amiss, my dear.”

When Dzoldzaya brought the drink over, Derek cupped the glass in his hands, which were visibly shaking, and downed the drink in three large gulps. Then he passed the glass back to her and sat on his hands once more.

“So, Derek. Tell me: what do you think of De Morgan's Proof?”

Derek sat there, his head shaking slightly from side to side.

“A masterpiece,” he said at length. “The problem of solving quasi-lateral transcendence has been baffling the greatest minds for over six hundred years now.”

“Indeed,” Tenzing nodded. “And yet Harper and Janson are not convinced.”

Derek was shaking even more noticeably now.

“Well, they're entitled to their opinion, of course ...” the man faltered.

“That's not the way I read it in last month's journal, *Phi Sigma*, Derek. I take it you do read the journal?”

“Of course,” the man nodded.

“Not to worry, Derek. Let's move on to your other speciality. As you can see, we have a fine piano in our common room.

Leslie, are you still with us? You are, good. Well, Derek, perhaps you and Leslie might entertain us for a few minutes? I'm told Leslie has an extensive repertoire and that you are renowned for your ability to work out a song and improvise from the mere humming of a bar or two ....”

“I ... I really don't feel up to it this evening, Tenzing. So, if you don't mind ....”

“On the contrary, Derek, I insist,” Tenzing returned forcefully. “You claim to be an accomplished pianist. Well, like it or not, now you're going to prove it.”

Derek lifted his hand and mopped his sweating brow. Then he suddenly lunged inside his jacket and brought out a snub-nosed automatic. The man got unsteadily to his feet.

“Do you know how long I've waited to get my revenge on you and your infernal Network, Tenzing?”

Tenzing was momentarily shocked, of course, and yet not altogether surprised.

“You look puzzled, Tenzing, so let me enlighten you. Bradley George, better known as Lucian, was a very dear friend of mine,” the man spat at him, his face growing bright red with rage.

“Ah, so that's what this is all about,” Tenzing nodded. “That figures.” Bitterness left over from the foiled Lucian Uprising, of course.

“Yes, Tenzing. And finally it's time to put an end to you and your ....”

That was as far as the man got. Across the other side of the common room, Inspector Jackson drew his revolver, took careful aim with arms outstretched, gently squeezed the trigger and drilled a hole right through the man's temple. A revolting red-grey mass erupted from the far side of his head and splattered the curtains beyond. Leslie simply fainted on the spot and had his partner Clement rushing over, thinking he'd also been hit. It was fortunate that everyone managed to hold down their food at the sight, Tenzing quickly shepherding them out of the common room; and fortunate also that they'd eaten earlier, since none could have faced their food after this.



Randal and Conrad sat watching the television in the

students' common room later that evening. Helen and Dzoldzaya had gone out for a walk in the fresh air to clear their heads and had yet to return, while Tenzing, Louis and Brian were doing their best to sort out the staff common room. They'd volunteered to clean up the worst and Matron and two of the cleaners would finish off.

Just then, the news came on. Word had reached the media about the problems in Gilgamar and this took up almost the whole of the world news. Randal was just about to turn the television off, but then a couple of the students came in and appeared interested, so he had second thoughts and left the set on.

Then came the metropolitan news. There'd been another killing, the anchor woman in the studio told them, and immediately Randal's ears pricked up.

What raised a lump in his throat and had his heart thumping heavily in his chest were these ominous words:

“Though the man's identity has yet to be revealed, he is said to be a white male, in his mid thirties and also a serving detective in the Sher Point police.

“It is believed that the body is in a badly decomposed state and has been there for some days, and that it was discovered by chance by a fellow officer and friend who was concerned about the man's sudden and unexplained absence from work.

“His colleagues who are investigating the killing with the assistance of a team of specialists in criminal forensics, are still at the scene, in Lower Mill Street, to the south-west of the city.”

“Oh my God,” Conrad swore, stressing each syllable, as it suddenly dawned on him and jumping up out of his chair. “I bet you my last dollar that the guy's name is Jackson.”

They dashed down the corridor toward the staff common room to find Matron and the cleaners hard at work scrubbing the carpet and taking down the stained curtains.

“Where's Tenzing?” Randal panted.

Matron stood up, hands on hip.

“This is deadly serious, Matron. Where is he?”

“I believe Inspector Jackson wanted a quiet word with him. They went off together a few minutes ago. I should try his study. But might I enquire ....”

“Later. But listen – if you bump into Jackson, scream blue

murder and run like hell. He's one of them.”

“Oh, my word. Are you sure?”

Why did people ask such questions? “Sure I'm sure.”

“Have you still got your gun?” Randal asked Conrad urgently as they turned back up the corridor toward the study.

“No, I handed it in. Louis was collecting them up. Well, I mean, I thought it was all over and done with now.” Conrad flexed his muscles. “We'll just have to manage on sheer wrath and adrenaline.”

As they approached the study, they could see that the light was on through the partly open door, and they could hear voices coming from within, so they fell silent and crept down the corridor to stand out of sight close to the door.

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“You don't seem surprised, Tenzing,” the inspector noted.

“Help yourself, inspector,” the man said to himself. “Why thank you, don't mind if I do.” He took one of the cigarettes from the wooden box on Tenzing's desk and struck a light against the polished rosewood desk with a match. The man blew a blue-grey smoke ring in Tenzing's direction.

Tenzing sank back in his chair, breathing slowly and deeply to calm himself and keeping a watchful eye on Jackson. Old as he was, he was still quite sprightly and looking for a momentary lapse of concentration or for the barrel of the gun levelled at him to drop.

“I had my suspicions when I heard you'd shot Philip Rowbottom, having caught him rifling through the files.”

“That was an unfortunate development.”

“It was either he who caught you going through the files, or else he who had discovered something amiss and was checking in the files, wasn't it?”

The man nodded. “You're quick, I'll give you that, Tenzing. But, alas, not quick enough.”

“So I got to wondering just what it was that might be of such interest, either to you or to Philip. Top drawer, third cabinet. That contains details of our field operatives. But you already had a list of names and addresses, so what further information might you or he be looking for?”

“I'll admit, you're getting warmer, Tenzing.”

"I'm told that Philip played the good host to all our people on the day of their arrival, going round shaking their hands and taking a general interest in them. With me so far?"

The man nodded. "You're getting warmer, true enough."

"And so I'm left wondering whether something was slightly amiss and that this dawned on Philip later, so he thought he'd have a look through the records to double check."

"Bravo, bravo, Tenzing. You would have made a fine detective, I'm sure. But I wouldn't bother making plans for a second career."

"Well, let me tell you something: at our little soirée, when I called upon Derek Shecklewig and we shook hands, in that instant I knew that he was not who he said he was."

"Go on, Tenzing ...."

"When I shook his hand, I was struck by how very rough it felt. Not at all the kind of hand I'd have expected from one whose occupation is mathematician by day and pianist by night."

"Excellent! Truly excellent, Tenzing," the man cheered. "Not that this will do you any good now, you understand."

Tenzing drew himself up in his chair. "And then it occurred to me that Philip being the observant chap he is and with such a remarkable eye for detail, verging on the obsessive, that perhaps he'd noticed this anomaly, too. So I took the liberty of checking through the records in the filing cabinet. And what should I find?"

"I don't know. Carry on, Tenzing."

"I found that whilst all the other record cards were in perfect alphabetical order, as I have come to expect from Philip, one of them was in the wrong place, as if perhaps it had been replaced hurriedly. I can assure you, that is not the kind of mistake that Philip would allow himself to make. Indeed, he simply could not abide such disorder."

"Go on ...."

"Which told me that Philip was not the last person to touch those records; well, unless he did this deliberately, of course. And yet, you said yourself that you'd stumbled upon Philip rifling through those cards.

"This gave me not one but two possible suspects: Derek Shecklewig and yourself."

"So?"

“So when I outed Shecklewig as an imposter you had two choices: since Shecklewig had his gun pointing at me, you could either play along and allow him to shoot me, or take Shecklewig out so that if he were taken, he wouldn't blab and implicate you. Why not the first?”

“Because I weighed up the odds, Tenzing. I knew that he could kill you and perhaps even one or two of the other guests, but with so many weapons issued, someone was bound to take him out and, since few of the others were proficient shots, it was likely that Shecklewig would be no more than wounded. And, as you say, likely that he would open his mouth and blab to the world.”

“Between you, you could have held us off.”

“With Shecklewig for a sidekick, I simply didn't fancy the odds. I much prefer to play the long, slow game, you see.”

Tenzing rose to his feet, slowly. “Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, old chap, but it's time to draw this charade to a close.”

Jackson rose, too, keeping the revolver aimed at Tenzing's chest. “For you, perhaps,” he sniggered, cocking the gun.

“Ready,” hissed Randal.

Conrad nodded.

On the count of three, they burst in and charged across the study.

Jackson swung round sharply and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

He squeezed the trigger again and again.

Click, click, click, click, click.

The man swung back to face Tenzing.

“That's your six, I would say,” remarked Tenzing, reaching into his drawer and producing his own gun.

The man turned round again. Randal and Conrad were there barring the door and the hulk, Clement Wilkins, was now coming down the corridor with his limp-wristed buddie, Leslie Stockley, in tow.

“But ...”

“Don't you remember Clement bumping into you at the soirée?” Tenzing asked him.

“Yes, now I come to think of it, he did.”

“That was the misdirection. It was Leslie who switched the guns.”

“Come again?”

“Oh, didn't I tell you. I had a gander at all our guests' records. And it turned out that our friend Leslie is a man of many talents: he was once convicted of pickpocketing. And who am I to let such talent go to waste?”

“But that doesn't make sense. I shot Shecklewig.”

“I left you one bullet in the top chamber.”

“What on earth for?”

Tenzing shrugged. “Because something told me to.”

“You see, I'm not just a limp wrist or a pretty face, am I, Inspector?” Leslie smiled at him, grabbing hold of the man's chubby cheek and joggling it. Then he gently tapped the man's bottom. “And you know, I think that the Sisters of Mercy in the Sher Point Penitentiary are going to take a real shine to you, boy, yes sirree. Bugger me if they don't.”



The following morning, bright and early, the first of the guests began to leave *Foxholes*. Some were sad to go, of course, since their work was often solitary and it had been an occasion to meet other folk within the Network; and Rosalie, Tenzing and the others were sad to see them go. Yet for all concerned, it was a chance to get back to normality once more and spend private time with their loved ones. And, of course, they'd see one another again from time to time; there was nothing final about their parting.

For little Kochees and Miriam, whom they'd had no option but to keep well away from any potential danger, and whom they'd sadly neglected since their arrival, it was a glad time. Kochees was so young and eager to play, to explore and to learn, and this was all so marvellous and novel for Miriam, too, and a real dream come true.

When the last of the guests had been waved off and disappeared down the drive, Tenzing breathed a great sigh of relief, and looked at his watch. “Tell you what, I think tonight we should celebrate. Warn the staff that after tea we're all going out – Miriam and Kochees included – and tell the prefects they'll be in charge this evening. Then powder your noses or whatever you

have to do, and come six o'clock-ish we'll all descend on – or rather ascend to – *The Wayfarer's Rest*. I think we'll take the scenic route again and pay our respects at the secret garden. Rosalie, you might phone ahead to warn Wayne and Carole that they have a coach party arriving, though be sure to let them know we'll already have eaten. Oh, and I'll phone young David and see if he's available, not that he's ever been known to refuse a good knees-up.”

“And in case any of you are counting the moths in your purses, don't worry: the drinks will be on me, friends, which is my way of thanking each and every one of you for your patience, your welcome efforts, gallantry and devotion, above and beyond the call of duty. Thank you for a job well done.”

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“Do you think I'll ever make it in the Tradition?” Dave asked Tenzing in a rare serious moment as they strolled back down the hill from *The Wayfarer's Rest* ahead of the others who were still chatting loudly.

Tenzing thought for a moment and then he spoke: “I know of an individual who was given a task before his master died. But he was told that he had to go it alone – though of course, we are never truly alone; neither separated from our master, nor from God. His master told him he would face many difficulties along the way and that he'd meet with much opposition, but on no account was he to make any claims as to his credentials, nor suggest in any way that his activities had any master's blessing or backing. And now, of course, with his master dead, there is no way of proving the truth of his story: his only option is to carry on and move on and find the truth, the *self-evident proof*, within himself.

“You may remember the tale of the robe. I don't have the book with me, of course, so please forgive me if you find the retelling or detail lacking. This individual was in the position where he was unable to 'mention the robe' or even hint at it, unlike the fellow in the story:

A Sufi went to visit a friend and was invited out to dinner, but as the friend saw that the Sufi had no suitable clothes to wear to the meal, he lent him a fine robe.

As soon as they got there, the friend introduced himself “...



and this is my dear friend Khan. But the fine robe, that's mine," he felt compelled to relate.

As they left, Khan told him off and the friend promised not to do it again,

"Don't mention it," Khan reassured him, accepting his apology.

At the next house they came to on their round of social engagements, the friend introduced himself "... and this is my dear friend Khan," he said.

Khan smiled approvingly.

"... But the expensive robe, that is his."

As they left that house, again Khan expressed his disapproval and his friend promised not to do it again.

"Don't mention it," Khan reassured him, accepting his apology.

They came to a third house and the friend introduced himself.

A forgiving man, Khan smiled in approval.

"... But as for the costly robe," the friend continued, unable to contain himself: "Well, um, well ... best not to mention it."

"Was that your own fate?" asked Dave as Tenzing concluded the story.

Tenzing smiled. "Not fate but destiny, David. For a time, at least. I was twenty years away from *Foxholes* working alone, like a lone honeybee, before I found out about my master's death. In my case, I was fortunate, because he had left a decree making me his successor, should his aides be able to locate me, since I'd long lost touch with *Foxholes*. Had it not been for that, heaven only knows where I would be today."

"And is this to be my destiny?" asked Dave thoughtfully. "To work alone, I mean; not to be your successor, I hasten to add."

Again Tenzing smiled and nodded, placing his hand on Dave's shoulder. "So I am told."

"But why?"

"As time goes by, we can become institutionalized, David. And take our domestic crops, such as grain or the humble tomato; even our farm animals. Again as time goes by, amongst other things monoculture can lead to strains that yield less and less over the years or are prone to disease or prove not to be sufficiently drought resistant, for example; and selective breeding can bring

about unfavourable changes which were unforeseen. At times like this we may need to go back into the world and look for natural, fresh, wild strains that do not suffer from these disabling factors, and introduce them into our domestic supply.

“Let me put another way, David: those who spend time working on their own may free themselves from or remain free of certain limiting factors such as conditioning and gain a lot of experience not available to those in groups and institutions. And they host and bring with them what you might call 'fresh blood'.

“So we are doing you a very big favour, David. You might not think so, but in reality this is a blessing from the very Source herself: not the bane it appears to be and, no doubt, the terrible and disrespectful slight that it feels to be to you, right now. As they rightly say, 'This, too, will pass' and there will come a time when you are able to look back at this scene and your apparent predicament and smile, even perhaps raise a hearty laugh.

“That said, when reintroduced, such folk who've been fundamentally changed by their travels and experiences – and by that I mean both in the world and in their own being – such folk very often meet with a lack of recognition, with misunderstanding and with opposition from both the general population and even those established in the way or 'set in their ways'.”

“I see, Tenzing. What worries me is that we hear tales of people driven mad by such experiences. Some even seem to make careers as 'advanced mystics' out of little more than such madness.”

“That is not the goal, David. Someone once said that the mental institutions are full of folk who have not been able to handle certain experiences, whilst the Friends are those who have. In order to build a fine palace fit for a king and queen, we first have to demolish the old ruins and clear the ground to prepare for the new foundation. Many of these people have simply got stuck picking around in the shattered ruins, thinking they've reached their goal. And many have entered the Way with a certain predisposition or proclivity for madness. But I really don't think that you need to worry about such things: I have every confidence in you.”

Dave didn't sound too sure. “I've been at this lark for twenty years now and it still feels as if I'm wearing the thing like some

cheap *eau de toilette*, out of habit and conditioning or fashion, rather than it being an essential part of my being.”

“As they say in the trade: 'fake it until you make it', David. And don't be disheartened. Ten years from now, folk may well be writing about you: 'half way through his twenty first year, David Jones finally made it'.”

“I wish. But what if I don't make it before I grow old and die?” Dave asked seriously.

“Then you may have to return, or choose to return, and give it another bash, David. I'm told that happens time and time again, my friend; time and time again.”

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**The End**

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~ Tenzing Jangbu Rinchen.

*Time and Time Again* is a short novel, circa 50,000 words. It is book 6 in the Shadowlands series.

